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A SPORT IN SPECTACLES; or, THE BAD TIME AT BUNCO.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC., ETC



"YER AIN'T NO SLOUCH, YALLER SKIN, AN' PLUMB CENTER PETE AR' PROUD OV YE."

A Sport in Spectacles; OR, THE BAD TIME AT BUNCO.

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"TWO COOL SPORTS," "MAGIC MIKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I. A RETROSPECT.

BUNCO was then in its earlier infancy when mining meant muscle and not capital, when it was the cradle and not the crusher that brought to light the hidden wealth that was waiting for the lucky finder, and when a man would sooner have hung himself off-hand than have gone to work for wages.

Bunco was two weeks old, and had a population of two hundred, but the noise of the washings there had gone abroad and the rush had started. Just at the head of it came Hunter Browne, with the dying man he had picked up in the Narrow Canyon.

Don't fool yourself about Bunco. It had several lawyers and doctors, with probably a fair sprinkling of preachers *incog.* For the latter no one thought of there being any use in a professional way; but one each of the former stood by the bedside of the dying man.

As the doctor had pronounced him beyond hope, the lawyer was engaged in drawing up his last will and testament, a process that was materially aided by the fact that in years gone by Hunter Browne had known him well, and not only had his confidence now, but was able almost by intuition to know what it was that Edmund Farrell, the deviser, wished to say. He was evidently sorely troubled by the plight of the old friend whom he had found by the merest chance, and it was only Farrell's coolness that kept him at his work.

"Come, old man, dry up on that," said the dying man. "It has to come some time, and I guess I'm as near ready now as I ever will be. It's not for myself that I care; but it's going to be rough on the kids, though there will be enough to keep them going for the present, with a chance for something big in the future. I want you to look after them, though. They'll need a friend. You'll stand by them both, old man. Won't you, now?"

"You know I will, Farrell—as though they were my own. But where are they?"

"The boy must have got here with the train. If I hadn't strayed away from it perhaps I'd have been good for twenty years yet. Look him up. Ed Burke is the boss. He can tell you all about him. And my sister has the girl. Huldah hates me, though. Don't believe a word she says. And you're to take charge of the girl, too. Have you got that down, squire?"

"Squire" Bradley gave a brief affirmative. He was inclined to fear that his client would die before the important document was duly signed.

"Yes, Huldah hates me, but she ain't a bad woman. Give her five thousand dollars fer a starter, out of the box that's in the wagon. Ed Burke will know which it is. Then the kids get the balance, and all I left back East. If one of 'em dies the other gets it all, and if both die before they grow up and get youngsters of their own, the whole of it goes to you; and so do my discoveries. It's rough to play out when I've found where to strike it rich. Oh, it will make your mouth water when you see that vein! There's a map of it in my belt, and I did enough work to hold it till you can get down to it; but play fair with my youngsters—and that's about all. Have you got it down, squire?"

Again the lawyer gave an affirmative. "Then I'll sign it, and Hunter can give you a hundred out of my belt. If it stands for twenty years, call on him and he'll give you a thousand more. Put that down, too, and give me a pen. I'm going fast. Can't wait for the tide to turn."

The addendum was scribbled. Edmund Farrell affixed his signature, which was duly witnessed by a brace of men who were called in for the purpose, and then the mangled man very leisurely died.

There was one observable fact—that he did not ask for any search to be made for his child. He whispered that the boy would have trouble enough in course of time without hunting him up now to see his father die. If he had any other reason he kept it to himself, and when the morning dawned Hunter Browne was left in possession as executor. He regulated the matter of the funeral, doing everything that was needed after the regular manner, even to the finding of the child in Ed Burke's corral, and bringing him—after taking charge of the box before mentioned, and other visible effects—to witness the burial.

Somewhat to the surprise of Neil Bradley—the lawyer who drew up the will—everything was found just as the deponent had stated; and

Hunter Browne continued to attend to things in the same energetic way in which he had begun.

He was not a family man, so far as was publicly known, but he looked after the comfort of his little charge, and wrote to Mrs. Huldah Waring, inclosing a copy of the will.

As he was executor under a carefully-drawn instrument, no one questioned his right to the papers of the deceased, even if any one thought anything about them; and he certainly did not lay them open for public inspection. If he was quietly doing anything with or in regard to them, Bunco was not informed, but went on its way prospering while its placers lasted. It soon became a canvas city of some thousand population, and the circumstance of Edmund Farrell's death had been forgotten by all except those most nearly concerned, when a lady made her appearance at the Jefferson House, inquiring for Hunter Browne.

That gentleman was not hard to find, nor was he surprised to learn that the feminine stranger was Mrs. Waring, who had answered his communication in person.

She was a young woman, and a handsome woman; but in a very brief period of time Hunter Browne found that Edmund Farrell had not exaggerated the state of his sister's feelings toward him.

"I could have killed him myself," she said, frankly, "so you need not expect me to feel much sympathy for him. He did me a wrong I can neither forget nor forgive. He killed my husband in cold blood. He murdered him! If I had known where to find him I should have tracked him to the gallows. If he had any money he stole it from my poor husband, and I shall certainly claim his effects to satisfy the debts undoubtedly due me."

Hunter Browne listened quietly. Some men might have been moved; he only appeared amused. He did not believe much in human nature, anyway. He heard her through without any interruption, until she had developed the nature of her intentions, then he remarked coldly:

"There seems to be some misunderstanding on your part. Mr. Farrell was possessed of some property but, it was all, with the exception of a trifling legacy, left to his children. I am empowered to pay you five thousand dollars—"

"What nonsense is that? Edmund Farrell had no children."

"Granted, but there were certain children that he said were his—a boy and a girl—and so long as we can prove their identity the money, less the legacy to you, will go to them. You have one of them in your possession, a girl, Ethel by name. I must insist on my guardianship over her being acknowledged."

"I deny the existence of any such child."

"Certainly. That is your privilege. I shall inquire in a general sort of way. If she is dead there will be so much the more for the boy."

"There is no boy, either. It is a scheme for a barefaced robbery which I shall fight as bitterly as I know how. If Edmund Farrell had a dollar when he died it belonged to my husband's estate, and I, as my husband's only heir, am entitled to it."

"Possibly; yet you will hardly be so foolish as to throw good money after none at all. You understand that I am the executor? That word is fully comprehended, even in this wilderness. If there is no boy then I am here. In my official capacity, acting under the last will and testament of the deceased, I simply defy you to get a dollar more than the five thousand left to you by your poor brother. I offer you that as a matter of grace, and if you do not choose to accept it within a reasonable time the offer will be withdrawn. It will be that much more for the executor."

Mrs. Waring had found her match. After consultation with the leading practitioner of Bunco, who happened to be Neil Bradley, she quietly accepted the five thousand dollars, for which she gave a receipt in due form, refused to look at her young nephew, and took her departure with as little flourish of trumpets as she had made on her entrance.

If Mrs. Waring had remained two days longer she would have been joined by an ally who might have helped her to make a better fight. As it was, Hunter Browne met and conquered the enemy in detail.

The next person that sought him out was a man—a pale-faced, hollow-chested man—though no doubt he was wiry enough when not quite so near to death's door.

His name was Prim. He was a detective by trade, and he was making a vindictive search for Edmund Farrell as any mortal could well make. It was really a satisfaction to Hunter Browne to note his intense dissatisfaction when he learned the facts connected with Farrell's death.

"Dead, is he? Then fer half a cent I'd dig his corpse up and hang him."

"Guess not," interposed Hunter Browne. "We're men here—white men. Wouldn't try it for no such money. Wouldn't be enough to pay for a store box, let alone digging a grave."

If Mr. Prim felt like getting on the war-path

a second glance into the coolly resolute face of Browne altered his intentions.

"Well, what's this story I hear about his having fallen over the side of a canyon? I don't swallow it. I cut him all to pieces myself, if he did crack my skull."

"Cracked your skull, did he? Needs investigating. He didn't say anything about it; but perhaps you pushed him over? Don't feel for a weapon. I don't ever do anything rashly. What was the racket, anyhow?"

"He killed a man and I've followed right along on his trail—except when I missed it. I'm hard to beat. I caught up with him, but he must have smelled me coming for he jumped the train just a little before I reached it, and I struck him alone in the woods."

"He was a good man, I'll admit; and rather had the best of it when I clinched in on him after I thought he was done for. He must have hit me with the butt of his revolver. Anyhow, the next thing I knew I was waking up at Plum Gulch, where they'd nursed me through. But I'd have had him. You're sure there's no mistake about it, eh?"

"Moderately sure. If Ed ain't dead he can stand being buried alive longer than most men."

"There's no other man such luck would happen to. Look here, I want to see that signature. Maybe I'm after the wrong man."

This sudden suggestion was received by Hunter Browne with the same coolness that had characterized him all along. Mr. Prim not only had a sight of the signature, but an interview with the subscribing witnesses.

"Perhaps you would like to see the kid?" inquired Browne, kindly. "If you had been here sooner you might have met Mrs. Waring. I'll show you her receipt for five thousand if it will do you any good. Anything at all in reason. I've got a contract to manage this business and I want to start out on a square foundation."

The "kid" was actually inspected as well as the receipt, and Prim gave up vanquished.

"You wouldn't like to engage in a little game of draw?" began Browne, in a hesitating way.

Prim gave him a glance of disgust. "What do you take me fer?" he said, brutally, and left the honest executor without a word of thanks.

His exit from Bunco occurred the following morning, and for twenty years nothing more was seen of any inquirers into the affairs of the deceased Edmund Farrell, and the town had forgotten that he had had any.

No wonder. Of the original hundreds not twenty people were left.

The placers had long since been worked out—the town had passed through a period of great depression, and now, Phenix-like, had risen out of its very ashes into a place of some importance.

Hunter Browne was still to be heard of. He was in quartz up to his elbows, and doing well with the Shadow Streak Mine, and it was rumored that he would do a great deal better with something else if he could find out how to manage some extra-refractory ores in the Bunker Hill shaft.

He was still a bachelor—a hard, healthy-looking man of fifty, and apparently alone in the world. Hugh Farrell had gone away years ago to be educated, and had never come back; and Judge Bradley was the only man in the "city" that ever gave a thought to the matters that in the infancy of Bunco had excited the public at large. It will be remembered that Neil Bradley had a pecuniary interest, however, and, prosperous as he now was, he did not intend to overlook it. He had waited a long while, with his eye on Hunter Browne, but the time for the settlement of the estate was at hand, and he hoped at last to realize.

CHAPTER II.

A SPECIAL COACH FOR BUNCO.

FROM Walnut Bar the trail led southwest, passing through the thriving mining-camp of Bunco.

The stage made a trip a week each way, and very often there was a coach on the road to convey passengers who could not wait for the regular, and to whom time is as money.

It was an extra that was standing in front of the station.

It had come in half an hour since and had disgorged a fair load of passengers, with appetites all set for the bountiful meal provided at John Rogers' hotel. As the driver had informed the passengers that he intended to make a halt of an hour, they had plenty of time, and leisurely enjoyed their meal, afterward strolling out on the covered porch.

At least a majority of the passengers did, and to give the probable reason why the move was so unanimous it may be as well to say that Slim Jack, the renowned driver of the vehicle now en route for Bunco, never had a fairer fare than a certain blue-eyed little damsel, who took the lead in the procession.

It is really astonishing how information is spread. There was not a passenger, down to We Wailo, the Celestial with almond eyes and a

queue, that did not know the name of Miss Millie Vandeleur, and every one seemed only too delighted to do her honor though Professor Elderberry, the young man in goggles and store clothes, rather had the inside track, much to the disgust of the rest, and especially to that of Plumb Center Pete, whose glances at the lanky looking professor were anything but kindly, though Elderberry was not the sort of person with whom he could conveniently pick a fight.

Miss Vandeleur had an escort of her own, a gray-headed gentleman with a pacific and retiring aspect, who had little to say, and who rather left the young lady to her own devices. This fact allowed the masculine portion of the cargo to pay her numerous little attentions, which they effected more or less gracefully.

Professor Elderberry evidently understood what was due to the sex; but there was a stiffness and angularity about his movements that was next thing to awkwardness; and he seemed to know very little about the local history of the region through which they were passing, so that, though he had been thrown more or less in her company all the way from San Francisco, he was not as intimate as might have been expected.

At various points of interest Pete Blockey—otherwise known as Plumb Center Pete—came prominently to the front as historian, lecturer and general instructor; an office which he filled in a satisfactory way, though his speech was of the rough, free and easy style natural to the man who had been knocking around the slope since 'Forty-nine.

Occasionally only was he at fault when, by chance, any name was mentioned; and he always had a ready answer to the questions that Miss Vandeleur asked—and she had as much curiosity as the average woman.

When the travelers reached the porch after dinner a little knot of citizens stood within hearing distance, talking about some one, to Miss Millie, of course, unknown.

Nevertheless the chance words which she heard interested her.

"I tell you it's him, sure enough. It's a bad sort of a day that I don't know Derringer Deck when I see him. He's up to some sort of a game, and don't you forget it."

"Well, that ain't the sort of a man I took him to be, nohow; and he hain't been doin' nothin' very bright here—jest bummin' round town. He looks to me like the biggest flat that ever struck the burg."

"Looks! That's all you know about him. I never seen the man yit that knows how Derringer Deck looks or order look. You jest go over an' try ter mount him, er holler 'draw' at him, an' see how soon he'll land yer on yer back. No, that's him, an' he's got a game on hand sure. Hush up, though. He's p'intin' this way; an' they say he don't like ter hear hisself talked about."

Miss Vandeleur heard the greater part of this, and noting the furtive glances with which they were eying some one in the distance she strained her eyes in the same direction, though it was some little time before she was certain that she had singled out the right individual.

Then her first feeling was one of disappointment.

He was, as far as outward appearance went, an ordinary looking chap, of medium build and dressed after the average manner of the country. He had the broad brimmed hat, high boots, heavy revolvers and broad-bladed knife that, to Millie, seemed the most necessary part of the true western costume and he carried, sometimes in his hand and sometimes tucked under his arm, a whip.

The latter adornment, however, was different from the quirt that the cowboys were the most familiar with, being a comparatively short "snake," braided from one piece of rawhide, with probably half a yard of stiffening in the handle.

Face and hands were bronzed and roughened, and now and then there was a curious gleam in his eye; but no one would be apt to take him for a man that would set the river on fire.

Nevertheless, there was something attractive in his face, as Miss Vandeleur decided when he came nearer, and she watched him with an earnestness that was unusual. It happened that she alone of her party had heard the conversation detailed. When she noted that he steered straight for Slim Jack, the driver, she gave a little start, and turned away. It was possible that the desperado, or whatever he might be, was about to become a fellow-passenger.

Pete Blockey had stolen away in search of the bar, and was coming back, temporarily "refreshed." He seemed just a shade confused at the sudden meeting, though Miss Millie did not at all notice it.

"By the way, Mr. Blockey, you have pat the genealogies of the different bad men—did you ever hear of such a person as Derringer Deck? His name was mentioned in my hearing a moment ago, and from what was said I imagine he has a history, that really might be interesting."

"Derringer Deck! Well, I should smile! Why, miss, he's too bad a man, in his way, fer you to know anything about, though he isn't apt to show his face down this here—

aways. Not that thar's much danger ov his showin' his elegant phisio' anywhar at present, ez it's ginnerally allowed that he's gone over ther range."

"Over the range? Which range do you mean, Mr. Blockey?"

"Ha, ha! I will fergit, miss, bless yer soul. I must remember that you're ez lam'like ez I war when I come hyer a tenderfoot in 'Forty-nine. Over ther range means up ther flume, miss—outen ther wet—passed in his checks. In fact, he's dead."

Miss Millie gave a gesture of surprise.

"I didn't understand it in that way. Dead? Why—"

Then she checked herself, and might have turned the conversation in another direction if Pete Blockey had been willing to allow it, but Blockey had been applied to for information, and he intended to give it—by the cord if need be.

"In course you wouldn't understand; an' I orter knowed better. But, Deck Bright war a hull team, an' ther yaller dorg under ther wagon, besides. When he cut loose suthin' drapped, you bet."

"But, what did he do?" asked Miss Millie, her interest again aroused.

As she asked the question she gave a furtive glance around to see that by no possibility the man could be within hearing distance.

"I'll tell yer what he did, fur one thing: he beat fero every time. He could jest skin the man ez invented keyards; an', by gum, he did it too! An' he war holy wrath when he got on ther war-path. He'd waltz right up to ther nozzle, ov a pair ov sixes with ther hammers drawn, 'thout keerin' a continental fur ther finger ez war on ther triggers; an' thar warn't no man ez could say when he had ther drop on him. He hed a way ov shakin' his derringers outen his sleeves ez wer' jest too sweet fur anythin'. Nerve! oh, git out! He war all nerve, an' he'd been gyratin' round yit if he hadn't tackled ther wrong gang—a gang, mind yer—ez laid him out when he warn't expectin' it. Yer see Doc Brown are a hard man ter climb, an' Deck orter knowed it. They blowed him inter so many leetle bits that ther corpus never war found; but, allee same, he's very dead—er somebody, beggin' yer pardon, bez lied most orful."

The brief history seemed satisfactory; and just as it came to a close the voice of Slim Jack was heard, shouting:

"All aboard!"

There was an immediate bustle and rush; but even in the excitement of starting out again on their journey, Miss Vandeleur saw, perched up by the side of the driver, the man whom the obliging citizen of Walnut Bar had pointed out as being beyond peradventure, the redoubtable sport, Derringer Deck.

CHAPTER III.

THE FLAT FROM WALNUT BAR.

It is not every ordinary man who can safely aspire to the post of honor by the side of a driver—especially by the side of such a driver as Slim Jack. If the no-account-looking acquisition at Walnut Bar succeeded without question to that position, it is most likely that it was in consequence of a good and sufficient deposit of collateral.

Plumb Center Pete looked up with a snort of disgust, and then crawled inside. He could not be in two places at the same time; but he had started out in the position now occupied by the stranger, and it seemed to be next door to an insult to have the place so filled.

He growled out something about Slim Jack's want of taste, which was overheard by Miss Millie.

"What is the trouble now, Mr. Blockey?"

Probably it was a suspicion that there was a chance for further enlightenment that caused her to ask the question.

"Why, nothin'; on'y dog-gone my tail-feather, ef it ain't enuf ter make a hoss sick ter see that gerlout up there puttin' on airs."

"Which person do you mean, Mr. Blockey?"

"Ther feller ez jest got on—ther Flat from Walnut Bar. Tenderfoot Tom they calls him thar. Why, blast him, ef what they say about him are ther truth, he orter be satisfied ef this outfit would take him along in the boot."

Miss Millie was evidently astonished—not at the impudence of the Flat from Walnut Bar so much as at the rapidity with which Plumb Center Pete gathered his information. An expression to that effect resulted in an additional stock.

"He calls himself a cowboy; but he hain't got half sense enuf fur a shepherd even. An' they give him every chance; but he never pulled his irons once. I dunno what 'n thunder he's goin' down ter Bunco fur, a place whar they jist make bad men."

"I am going there, myself, Mr. Blockey; and I have never given much indication of being an expert with revolver or cards. I have heard of it as a business place, and perhaps this Tenderfoot Tom may be a business man. He really seems to be a quiet, unassuming fellow."

Blockey rubbed his forehead, and was silent

for a minute. The possibility that a man might be a worthy candidate for a position in Bunco society, without being able to hold his own with the roughs and toughs of that unsanctified town, had not before suggested itself, and being presented by a non-combatant, whose opinions were worthy of consideration, he was willing to give it due attention.

"Wal," he said at length, with due solemnity, "I don't think much of men ez calls 'emselves rich, thet can't hold their own end level. Ther's a place fur 'em, no doubt—but it ain't hyar. A feller ov thet kind's jest throwin' his life away when he steers down towards Bunco."

Miss Vandeleur's blue eyes twinkled, and she uttered a pleasant little laugh.

"Then you think that my friend here, Mr. Allbright, and myself, are making a mistake, and you mean that as a gentle warning. Thank you. But I don't intend to be frightened; nor do I intend to turn back. Bunco may be bad, but I don't believe it will harm any of us."

"Oh, bless your soul, miss, I didn't mean it in that way. You'll jest do Bunco proud, you an' your friend; but it's sich no-count, triffin' chaps ez him thet brings a town a bad name. They're layin' 'round, beggin' ter be taken in an' dun fur. Ef ther boys was angels they couldn't help it; an' bein' jest mortal men, they grease the'r boots an' swaller em' hull. Mr. Allbright are a professional man, ef my eyes don't mistook me; an' professional men an' ther sex ain't surposed ter handle ther irons, onless they sets up in thet line. But a cowboy thet don't fight at ther drop ov ther hat, an' actooally eats sand—waugh! Kerry me out!"

"Eat sand? That is another of your Arizona terms that I don't—well, as you would say, I don't catch on to yet."

"I'll tell yer how that were. Though it ain't jinnerally known ther gellout come inter ther Bar lookin' fur one Kunnel Johnson. Sez he war ter meet him byer, an' he put on frills enough ter make a cat sick. Ez everything war runnin' on wheels thar warn't no trouble till ther other night, 'round at a fandang', some ov ther boys got ter pluggin' at his boot-heels, an' you kin jest take my straps ef he didn't turn sick an' beller murder."

"Boot-heels. Again I don't understand. You must think I am awfully ignorant."

"I'll sallivate ther man ez sez so. It's a way they hez. Ther genooin cowboys an' rustlers, they kin shoot fur keeps, an' so, when ther dancin' is a-goin' on, all on a sudden ye'll hear a bangin' away like a young army at work, an' then boot-heels'll begin ter fly, 'cause they shoots 'em off on each other. They ain't no danger, onless a feller kicks ther wrong way. Ther ain't no rustler ez'll try it on onless he kin do it, an' ef he hit a man they'd hang him, sure. But yer see ther cuss didn't hev ther nerve. Now he's goin' down ter Bunco, still a-lookin' fur his Kunnel Johnson."

"Is Bunco a dangerous place, ah?"

Professor Elderberry had not apparently been listening; but the question showed that Blockey's words had fallen on other ears than those of Miss Vandeleur, and there really seemed to be a quaver in his voice as he asked.

Plumb Center Pete turned toward him with a look of disdain.

"Ther ain't no place yer ever seen thet wa'n't dangerous ef yer time was nigh at hand; but I don't think it will be extree dangerous ter you, ef yer keeps outen the road. Now, I'm goin' down there ter see what I kin make outen Hunter Browne. I heerd he wants a boss fur his works, an' I'm jest his meat. That suits me—but I reckon it would be dang'rous fur you. You wouldn't last two days there. But you kin sell pain-killer, er corn medecin', er any sich ez comes nat'r'l in yer line 'thout stirrin' up much bile. You've got your line, an' I've got mine. When I sling lead it goes plumb-center; an' when you sling pills, I s'pose they git thar, too. You's goin' ter start a doctor's shop, I shed judge. Eh?"

Professor Elderberry looked as though he might be a young disciple of Galen; and Plumb Center Pete had seen the name in full, Dr. George Elderberry, Boston, Mass., so that his guess was not altogether without warrant. Still the professor did not seem at all inclined to advertise his intentions, and only responded in a general sort of way:

"I had thought of stopping there a while, ah, provided I found, ah, an opening commensurate with my abilities; but, ah, I do not like to learn that it would be accompanied with, ah, any personal risk. What—what is the especial danger that you will be subjected to, ah?"

"Bullets, steel, p'sen! When yer hev a gang o' men ter manage, ther butt-end ov 'em are bad. When yer knock one down his pard sometimes plugs without stoppin' ter argy. You hev ter shoot quick, an' plumb-center. That's me. Down hyer it don't take skill ter run a mine so much ez nerve, an' that's what Browne wants, I'm a-bettin'; an' that's what I travel on, an' you don't."

As Plumb Center Pete—actually without meaning it—took on rather a bullying tone, Professor Elderberry looked more than ever uncomfortable, and said nothing further. He gave a speculative glance a moment later at Miss Van-

deleur, evidently wondering how or why she could enjoy conversation with such a ruffian.

But Miss Millie had her own notions, reasons and schedule of rates, and as Plumb Center Pete was careful to say nothing offensive the fair passenger continued her quest for information.

"You spoke of acting as superintendent for one Hunter Browne. I should suppose if he was a man worth working for he would look after his own affairs. What sort of a person is he?"

"Hunter Browne? Well now, I tell you, he's jest ole bizzness—"

He ceased speaking suddenly, for at that moment from the roadside there rung out the harsh, but well known order:

"Halt, thar, an' hands up! Don't you move, Slim Jack, or we'll drill you. Hyer's the toll-bar, an' we're the depity tax collectors! Inside an' top side git ready ter shell out cash or brains, it don't make much difference which."

At the very first words the coach stopped. Perhaps the horses understood the game as well as the cargo; perhaps Slim Jack had an occult way of drawing his teams to a halt. Miss Vandeleur gave a little nervous scream; Mr. Albright looked very uncomfortable; Professor Elderberry sat bolt upright, as if too frightened to do anything else, while Plumb Center Pete swore softly. The latter was just as wise as any man, and small blame to him if he recognized the fact that for the present there was nothing else to do, but all the time his ears were open to catch all that was going on without.

Slim Jack was a veteran, and as he knew that so long as no one started a circus he would be perfectly safe he retained a marvelous coolness. His foot rested firmly on the brake, and his hands were held high, though, as he threw his body backward, he kept a strong pull on the reins. Certainly there was not the sign of a quiver in his voice as he answered back:

"Go slow, Mister Men! This cargo won't fight nohow, an' all yer got ter do is ter rake in ther duckats; so ther' ain't no use ter be p'intin' them irons this way."

"Never mind them things. They'll be mighty bad medicine if any one tries to cut up rough; and you needn't mind 'em if they don't. Who've you got inside?"

"All tenderfeet but Plumb Center Pete, an' he's got a level head, an' no coin."

"You insiders, there, get ready your plunder. Ther's a woman thar—I heard her scream. We don't want to be rough with the sex, but I can tell you the first crooked move we'll just stand back and ventilate that coach."

"Oh, thunder!" put in Slim Jack. "Do yer think I got nothin' ter do but sit hyar with my hands up in ther air? If you want yer plunder, come an' take it."

"All in time. The unhealthiest thing you could do would be to get so tired as to drop your hands."

It was a new spokesman at the front now, and as he uttered the warning, by a wave of his hand he caused his followers to advance.

Outside, the Chinaman, who had scarcely uttered a word from the very commencement of the journey, had turned so pale that he was actually green.

Tenderfoot Tom's hands had gone up at the very first order, whip and all, and he sat there very much like a photograph of hard times, his eyes and mouth wide open.

Inside, Miss Millie was in a world of trouble. "Will they take all that we have?" she asked at large.

"I wouldn't give a dollar fur what they leave in ther line ov cash," responded Blockey. "This gang'll be dead busted when they get through."

"Then we may as well die right here." She clasped her hands, and looked almost as though she meant it.

"I'm sorry fur ye, little woman; but it ain't no place fur ter raise a circus. Ef I hed a side pard hyar I might jump ther hearse an' try it on; but I can't kerry the whole contract. Hunt Browne wouldn't hev no use fur me afore I got half-way through. Plumb Center Pete kin shoot, but he wants a show fur his white alley afore he begins."

The condolence had one effect; it seemed to rouse the anger of the young lady. Her eyes flashed, and she was about to make some sharp answer, when there came a warning hist from Pete Blockey.

"Hyer they be, sure enuff! We'll hear the balance when the fun's over."

Straight up to the stage came the road-agents and from the clatter of hoofs it seemed pretty certain that there were at the least half a dozen of them.

It was no discredit to Plumb Center Pete's courage if he more than half expected to remain quiescent. He had very little to lose except his life, and he didn't intend to throw that away without knowing a better reason why than the probable loss of a few dollars. Nevertheless, he had slyly turned the knob of the door, so that a touch would spring it open, and now he leaned back, fairly out of sight, but waiting. On the contrary, Professor Elderberry leaned well forward, as though the scene that was about to ensue had a fascination for him.

Tenderfoot Tom had said nothing, and no one expected him to do anything. He held his arms up so high that they were straight, and behind the left one lay the whip that had gone up with his hands. It never seemed to occur to him to drop it, and in the way it was held it was not likely to attract attention.

The outlaws evidently believed that they had a sure thing, and probably reconsidered their original intentions. The well-laid ambushade was broken up, and though the leader remained in the background, the rest advanced with drawn revolvers, but without much caution. They were disguised in a sort of rough uniform, and each face was masked.

One held Slim Jack in check, two others paid more particular attention to We Wailo and Tenderfoot Tom, while the rest looked after the inside.

"No nonsense, hyar," warned one, rapping sharply on the ledge of the window with the barrel of his revolver. "We've got you down fine, and know just what meat we're after. The rest ov yer hes ter shell out, in course; but there's a Mister Albright hyar, thet hes a thousand cash, an' ef he don't roll out that amount, there'll be a merry little war hyar; an' there's a Miss Millie Something-or-other that lugs along a purty stiff boodle. If she don't fork over her share, there'll be trouble. Ready, Mr. Albright? Shell out!"

"Yes, yes," said that gentleman nervously. "The money—hers and mine—is in my valise. Take it and go."

And at the same time a revolver was being pointed up toward Bowers, while its owner growled:

"No nonsense, now. Out with yer stamps, er there'll be a dead duck!"

"Oh, now, come," pleaded Bowers, finding voice under the pressure of necessity. "I ain't got barely more ner enough ter take me down ter Bunco an' keep me goin' till Kunnel Johnson comes. I'd sooner see yer later, ef it's all ther same ter you."

The tones indicated an exasperating good faith, and the road-agent was angered accordingly.

"What yer take me fer? Shell out, er I'll hev yer offen thar in ther shake ov a buck's tail."

To emphasize his words, he pushed his horse up nearer, and allowing the muzzle of his revolver to droop, he made a gesture as though he intended to carry his threat into instant execution.

Then occurred a very remarkable phenomenon.

Mr. Bowers, at the near prospect of complete bankruptcy, became suddenly galvanized into action, and he moved in a way that was as novel as it was unexpected.

The whip that had been hanging along his left arm, described a circle with lightning speed, and the lash fell with a sharp swish across the brow of the road-agent, cutting through the mask right down to the bone.

Then he leaned over and gave another swish, and reached another road-agent.

A third time his whip fell, but this time on the wheelers, and as the horses gave a furious spring there was a short sharp crack, followed instantaneously by another, two road-agents dropping to two derringers-shots. Four men were put hors du combat in little more than four seconds; and Plumb Center Pete had not yet had a chance, if he wanted it, to begin getting his work in. All the show he had was a snap shot at the astonished chief as the coach flitted past, and there was at least the satisfaction of seeing him throw up his hands with a sudden start, as though hard hit.

Probably to the satisfaction of every one, there was no pursuit.

Once having his teams in motion Slim Jack kept them going, and left that dangerous neighborhood at a far greater rate of speed than he had dared to hope for, and to which his passengers made no manner of objection.

They were in high spirits now. The interruption had come just in time for Mr. Albright to escape banding out his valise, and if Pete Blockey had not taken as prominent part as he might have liked to be had shown his good intentions.

"Dog-gone my high-heeled top-knot, if that ain't ther neatest thing out on road-agents," he said excitedly as he drew in his head from a look to the rear.

"Who'd a-thunk Tenderfoot Tom war sich a snorter when he cuts loose? Didn't he tuck ther braid to 'em? But, what I'd like to know is, who fired them shots. It warn't no slouch, an' don't yer furgit it."

"Which shots, Mr. Blockey?" asked Miss Millie. "I thought it was the road-agents firing at us until I saw two of them fall. Didn't they do the shooting at all?"

"Nary time, an' that's what gits me. Slim Jack wouldn't 'a' done it, not fur rocks, piles of 'em."

"Don't you think it was the man you call Tenderfoot Tom?"

"Not much. He ain't ov ther shootin' kind."

"I think then," interjected Professor Elderberry, who had partially recovered his equa-

nimity, "that it must have been—ah—the Chinaman."

If the choice had not been narrowed down so closely, in Blockey's mind, he would have laughed such an idea to scorn. As it was, he caught at it in an amazed sort of way.

"A heathen Chineel oh, jumping Jehu, I can't swaller that!"

But at that very minute the upside down face of We Wailo appeared at the window, his eyes twinkling with satisfaction as, for the first time, they heard his voice:

"Chinee shoe'tee belley wellee, allee samee 'Melican man. Allee louddee, eblee timee."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST SYMPTOMS OF THE BAD TIME.

BUNCO was well aware of the fact that a section of the gang of road-agents that had terrorized the road between Glory Gulch and Walnut Bar had lately been paying some attention to the traveling public at a point nearer than usual to the thriving camp that was by no means yearning for their presence.

When the coach drew up in front of the Jefferson House, still the principal hotel in the place, there was quite a flutter of excitement at the appearance of the passengers, which was soon to be intensified by a knowledge of the dangers through which they had passed.

As it was the evening hour, before sunset, the usual loungers were on the piazza. Hunter Browne was there, talking lazily to Senor Manuel Pereira, a sleek little man, clad in black, with a dark face, large, white teeth, and hot, glistening eyes, who smoked his cigarette in a slow, methodical manner, that somehow contrasted strangely with his general appearance.

As Hunter Browne was a prominent man among those having mining interests, so Manuel Pereira was prominent among those having purely commercial ones; and it was generally supposed that the two together could buy up considerably more than half the camp, though they were not at all related as to business, and Pereira was comparatively a new-comer.

Besides these there were half a dozen other men of more or less standing, who boarded at the Jefferson House.

The appearance of Miss Vandeleur was an agreeable surprise. Young ladies were not plenty in Bunco, and handsome ones were very scarce. Senor Pereira threw away his cigarette, and Hunter Browne uttered a little exclamation that probably meant satisfied astonishment—though he was almost old enough to serve on a pinch as the young lady's grandfather.

Every one was interested in that young lady, but these two particularly so, though they did not suspect it until, as she passed through the portal of the Jefferson House, their eyes were in some occult way drawn toward each other. What each saw produced a revelation as to his own feelings!

Immediately upon the stoppage of the vehicle Tenderfoot Tom rolled off on the street side and disappeared. He had made some inquiries of Slim Jack, and was satisfied that the Jefferson House was not for him.

We Wailo, who had made no inquiries, and seemed to know nothing of Bunco or his own wishes, discreetly waited until the inside portion of the load was disgorged before climbing down. Then he scrambled off and stood contemplating the Jefferson House with an insinuating smile on his face.

Plumb Center Pete was on the point of following the others up the steps, though by some chance the professor had gotten ahead of him in attentions to Miss Millie. Some remark, made by a bystander, put him in mind of the Chinaman from whom he had not heard since the announcement, just after the fight with the road-agents.

He turned around abruptly with outstretched hand.

"Hyer, heathen, ye'r a solid man ter tie to ef yer be a leetle nigh onter yaller. When it kims ter bizzness yer thar, every time. Shake!"

We Wailo's smile became a little more idiotic, but he put his paw in that of Blockey's without the least hesitation.

"Yer ain't no slouch, Yaller Skin, an' Plumb Center Pete ar' proud ov ye," loudly announced the Bouncer; "an' ef yer ever lubricate it will do me big to set 'em up. Kim inside, an' I'll show 'em all a Chinee hero, an' no mistake."

"We Wailo muchee fladee 'Melican man no likee."

The Chinaman had probably had some experience with the keepers of prominent hotels, and was doubtful of his reception at the Jefferson House. If Blockey had not insisted he would have turned away in search of a house more suited to his social position.

But Blockey did insist, and led him in with a flourish.

"Thar, gentlemen, is ther niggest to a civilized heathen thet they make 'em. Ef he didn't drop two road-agents I are a condemned liar. Barkeep, set 'em up for the Mungullian."

As Miss Vandeleur and the two gentlemen had disappeared, the attention of the loungers was called to Plumb Center Pete, who had the advantage of not being altogether a stranger in

Bunco; and the mention of road-agents made matters more interesting.

In almost no time there was a circle of questioners, and the history of the affair, as supplemented by Slim Jack, was received with enthusiasm. If Tenderfoot Tom had only waited he might have been as much a hero as any of them. His exploits with the whip were all that the driver could vouch for, but as Jack took on trust the statements of Plumb Center Pete and We Wailo—though the latter had not very much to say for himself—the Chinaman's reputation was made.

"And now, George Washington Jefferson," added Blockey, addressing the proprietor, "ef yer want a bang-up, A Number One, black-yeer-boots-fur-a-quarter, washee washee, that'll be a credit ter yer house, this hyar Chineeman are open fer an engagement, an' yer had better rake him in."

Plumb Center Pete spoke first for the Chinaman, and with success. Jefferson had an opening for just such a man, and before the other arrivals had had time to seat themselves at the comfortable r-past prepared for them, We Wailo had become a regular *attache* of the house.

After supper Blockey began to look after his own interests, and approached Hunter Browne in regard to the superintendency that he understood was at his disposal.

"I was wanting a man, Blockey," was the thoughtful response; "but I'm not sure that you will fill the bill. I know you got along first-rate in the old Red Jacket, and all that; but this is something else. I want a man who can manage my new strike. I've had several hands at it, and they just couldn't do anything at all; but I think I've got the man I'm after now, if recommendations go for anything. I'll see him by-and-by; when his grub has settled a little, and if he pans out well, I'll have to give him the job."

"All right; no harm done," responded Pete, cheerfully. "What's he like? Does he know beans when ther bag's ontied?"

"You ought to know. He came down in the stage. His name is Elderberry, and he has first-class recommendations from the college sharps back East and a couple of mines that he worked in with ores something like mine."

"Goggle Gawge! Well, I will be hanged! Kerry me out!"

"What's the matter with him?" asked Browne sharply.

"Nothin'—oh, nothin'!" answered Pete, spreading out his hands in a quick gesture, indicating that he might speak but did not want to.

"Anything wrong about him? Ain't he a square man?"

"May be square enough in his way, but you want a man with sand. He's a tenderfoot, I don't keer what mines he's worked in. Ain't no more idear ov a regular jamboree 'th guns an' knives—oh, he'd be jest fresh meat fur ther boys!"

"There's something in that, Pete, and I ought to have thought about it. I've got to have a man with brains to get out what I know I have, and I reckon I'll have to run a combination team. Do you think you and he could pull together?"

"No, sir-ree! Sorry, Browne, but ef my prattle ways don't suit I'll hev ter go fuder, an' you'll lose a mighty good man. I can't yoke in with no college-bred cusses. When they take hold they jest bust things wide open till they gits some sense hammered inter 'em, an' that's ther job I don't banker ter help in. I toots my own horn an' peddles my own fish."

Blockey did not appear to be angry, but he was obstinately bent on not having anything to do with the new superintendent. He seemed to consider the conference closed, but Browne had something further to say.

"All right; no offense; and if you should reconsider, you know where to find me. Now, a question. I noticed a young lady in the cargo this evening; can you tell what brings her down here?"

"You've got me; unless it's that scaly-lookin' Allbright that hes her in tow."

"Allbright? You mean the old gentleman that is with her. Who is he, then?"

"I'll never tell—though I reckon, arter all, that he's a law sharp from Friscowards. They're up ter somethin', but they're close ez clams. I talked all 'round 'em, but they wouldn't drop a sign."

"So you think they have a mission? Did they inquire after anybody in particular? You might get at it in that way, you know."

"Not a soul in purtik'ler; an' everybody in gin'ral. Ther Chinees's ther on'y party in the hull outfit that's wuth shucks ter cackle, and he sed plumb up he war lookin' fur a job 'washee-washee, black um 'Melican bootee, an' I wrung him right in on Jefferson. Ef ther gal hed talked half es squar I'd 'a' felt like helpin' her over ther raffle. Mebbe you knows suthin' 'bout her yerself. 'Twouldn't be more onlikely than findin' Professor Elderberry war your invoice."

Pete looked curiously at the mine-owner and waited for his answer.

"No, I don't know her, more's the pity," re-

sponded Hunter Browne, slowly shaking his head. "Her face reminds me of some one, I don't know who; and she's as handsome as a dream. If she needs a friend here, she can call on me; and you can suggest as much if you keep up your acquaintance."

"Oh, I reckon sha'll nod when we pass by. Ther's nothin' stuck up about her. But don't you furgit it, Browne, ef she wants a friend Plumb Center Pete are ther man fur her to ketch on to."

"Don't be jealous, Blockey. I'm too old to make a mash, and I don't suppose you'd go seriously gallivanting around a kid of her age, either. We can both be her friends, can't we? I don't like the lawyer, though."

"Neither does I, though I tell yer he's got heaps ov boss sense. He never speaks when it ain't needed. Ef he ain't on ther square with leetle divinity she's got a mighty tough road to travel."

"If he's not on the square I want to know it, Pete. I've got some little influence here, and I'd run him out before he would know who was after him."

"Hyar's with yer, Browne."

If there had been any lingering hard feeling about the superintendency it seemed to have disappeared when Pete Blockey extended his hand, in a gust of enthusiasm.

"Put it thar, pard! Put it thar! Eh? What'n sanctified blazes be those?"

Browne gave a start. Blockey gave another; but along with it he made a motion that was like a flash. Before the mine-owner could wink twice Plumb Center Pete held a cocked revolver in each hand; just as there was a great crash, and a jingle of breaking glass. Then a man came flying out of the Jefferson House, window-ways, taking a lower sash with him.

As the man struck the ground Plumb Center Pete looked up, and then, in the window frame, he caught a glimpse of We Wailo, who shook his fist once or twice, in evident wrath, and then disappeared, in time to escape the possible gaze of the victim, who sprung to his feet and stared wildly around.

"Caramba!" howled the man.

"Who strikes me? His life will I have; the coward; the dog!"

A knife of extravagant length was making circles in the hand of the maddened man, and the man was no other than Senor Manuel Pereira, the well known capitalist and prominent citizen of Bunco.

CHAPTER V

WE WAILO IS STILL "ALLEE LOUNDEE." WHEN he had once taken in the size of the row Plumb Center Pete was quite at his ease.

His revolvers dropped back into their respective receptacles, and he advanced toward Pereira.

The senor was bewildered. Though mad enough to fight, and aware that some one had done something to him, he did not seem to understand exactly what it was, or from whose hands.

He stared wildly at Blockey, who was not at all concerned, but patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Pears ter me yer orter hev more sense than ter be doin' sich groun' an' lofty tumblin'. How's yer appletite, an' did yer sleep well las' night? Ef it wa'n't you, ole man, I'd swar yer hed 'em; I ain't alltergether sure yer ain't."

"Sancta Maria—what?" howled Pereira, though somewhat soothed by the kindly, respectful tone.

"Jim-jams," answered Pete, without hesitation.

"Ef yer knows what's good fur yer you'll try ter quiet down, an' git some sleep."

Probably nothing but the thoroughly unconcerned and matter-of-fact manner of the speaker saved him from immediate attack. Pereira glared at him for an instant without speaking; and in that brief fit of silence cooled down amazingly.

It was only when excited that the speech of the senor was so idiomatic; and he was a man of too much strength to howl around long without doing anything. Besides he knew who Blockey was by sight and reputation. With an effort he curbed his anger, and putting away his knife, bowed quite politely, as though just seeing Plumb Center Pete.

"Pardon, senor, well might your mistake be made, as a stranger I am to you though I have seen you before. I forgot myself, that is all. Some one attacks me from behind, when I have no chance to resist and the first thing I know I find myself here."

He waved his hand around, and then pointed downward to the ground on which he was standing.

"Reckon I'll have to believe you; but when I saw you coming feet first, out through ther winder, hanged ef I didn't think it war a case ov man with ther poker. Who was he? What had you been doing?"

"Ah, now I see," answered Pereira, looking up. "I was inside and I came out. Nothing had I done. That has been one of my rooms. I went in, when I was attacked from behind by a madman. I will see Senor Jefferson."

Altogether there came a very deadly coolness over Manuel Pereira, which Plumb Center Pete noticed, but for which he did not care a particle. For reasons of his own, though not intending to start it, he did not at all care if he did have a little unpleasantness with the worthy senor; but as he was pretty well satisfied that We Wailo had had ample time to make his retreat he was not sufficiently interested to further interfere.

The senor took two or three steps toward the house. Then he turned abruptly and strode back toward Blockey.

"There! see! behold! It is the truth I have told you. On my neck see you if I cannot feel the marks of this hand."

It was an actual fact.

There, on the back of Manuel Pereira's neck, was the imprint of a hand. The gripe that had left it there must simply have been enormous.

"It's thar, sure enough, ole man, an' I don't want ter git any of that chap's fingers in mine. Ef you're wise, you'll keep outen his way till he ain't quite so much on the rampage."

"Wise am I; but five hundred dollars will I give to know just who put such marks there. See! If you know, tell. It will be good for you. The money waits."

Pereira looked keenly at Blockey, and undoubtedly he had a vague suspicion that if that gentleman would speak he might be able to tell a thing or two.

He might as well have talked to one of the posts of the piazza.

"That's a heap o' money, senor, when a feller's busted; but I can't tell a lie."

That was enough. The senor went into the house, never heeding the half-dozen that tried to stop him.

"Queer sorter racket, that; don't yer think so, Browne? Kinder strikes me ef he hedn't 'ben up ter somethin' crooked we'd 'a' heard him shout considerbul louder."

Hunter Browne concurred; though he was in too deep thought to more than half get the idea. As he simply nodded Blockey said nothing more, but strode away, entering the hotel a moment or so after the senor; but, as Pereira turned in one direction Plumb Center Pete, once inside, took another. He wanted to see the Chinaman; firstly, to know what it was all about; and secondly, to give him warning.

We Wailo had dropped to the geography of the place as if by instinct. Pete met him hurrying toward the rooms of the new-comers with a trunk on his shoulders, and stopped him right in front of a door.

"Hyar, Chinees, bein' ez I'm yer foster-dad, I'm after a pint er two, an' I'll give yer a warnin' fur nothin'. He don't know who bounced him, an' I'll never tell; but you'd better keep outen his way ez much ez yer kin er he may drop to yer. Now, what was it all about, an' who helped yer?"

The eyes of the Celestial expanded to their widest extent, and he shook his head.

"We Wailo no sabbe."

"Don't try ter play that on yer uncle Ezra. I axes yer fur what yer throwed ther Greaser outen ther winder. Wa'n't I thar, an' didn't I see him go?"

"Melican much dlunkee—jumpee out win-dee."

Such obstinate innocence was more provoking than convincing, and when We Wailo made a movement to take up the trunk he had set down Plumb Center Pete's face grew dark.

And just at that crisis the door at which they were standing flew wide open, and Miss Vandeleur making her appearance, addressed We Wailo, point-blank:

"So it was you that came to my assistance. Allow me to thank you; though, after the first shock was over, I have no doubt but that I could have held my own very well. Don't be afraid. Mr. Blockey will not betray you, neither will I. Accept this, if you please. I am glad to be able to give it to you."

Miss Millie held out her hand; and the Chinaman, without a word, extended his, pocketing the five-dollar gold piece with such rapidity that Pete scarcely saw the coin as it passed between the two. Then he suddenly swung the trunk into the room, and without waiting for any further orders skipped away.

"Guess, miss, ther heathen are right. 'Twouldn't be healthy fur him ter go blowin' round what he'd done. Might git his chunk put out afore he knew what war goin' on. Ef yer really are thankful, ther less yer say 'bout him ther better. Manuel Pereira are a real bad man."

"Pereira? Ah, that was the name of the man I found in my room when I came back from supper! He sprung at me and I was so frightened that I ran into Mr. Allbright's room. Then I heard a little noise, and only guess the rest."

"That's enough. You have it down fine, an' you needn't ask no more questions. Next time ef anything happens, I hope yours truly'll be 'round. I'm my own man yit, an' ef yer need a friend that kin see inter a grindstone er shoot plumb-center you'll find me in town."

"Thanks, thanks; but I hope I will not need you."

"Dunno 'bout that. Reckon female angels don't kim all ther way ter Bunco fur nothin'."

Yer wouldn't like ter tell what's on board? Mebbe two hands are better than one ter build frum."

The girl looked sharply at the speaker.

The two had been on easy terms since almost the first moment of meeting; but this was something else. After a moment's hesitation she spoke.

"No, sir—I will not—I cannot—now. Yet I do not expect to blind your eyes to the fact that I have a mission and a secret. I must know the truth first. After that I may also have something to avenge. But I cannot tell you more, and I beg of you neither to ask me nor to mention what I have said."

"All right. I ain't ther talkin' kind. Ef yer needs me call 'round, an' don't furgit ter keep an eye on P'reira. He's a condemned snake, anyhow, an' he'll hate ye like p'isen arter this. So long."

Miss Vandeleur nodded and then looked after the retreating form in a questioning way. Perhaps she would have been delighted, if she had dared, to give him something more tangible, but she returned slowly to her room, thinking.

"No, no. You have the good will, perhaps, but I dare not risk you, since it may well be that you are one of those whose interests lay counter to mine. Your friends are more than likely to be my enemies, and to trust you would be madness. And yet, if things were different, it might well be to my interest to have him within call, if he is such a man as he represents himself to be. I wish I could see him tested. I wish I could trust others more thoroughly, and that I was not working so in the dark. I must get more light for myself."

The girl was evidently in a thoughtful mood; and hesitating as to her proper course.

"I must make no mistake. He may be the most arrant coward alive. The other man never hesitated when the road-agents were around. I feel as though I could trust him. It is certain that I must get a view from another standpoint, so that I can know whether I am being truly dealt with. As for Blockey—he talks too much, and he is too willing. I even half-suspect he knows something of the mission. If so, appearances have been wonderfully kept up. I will see."

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROFESSOR STRIKES TROUBLE.

THE Jefferson House was not by any means destitute of the ordinary conveniences of a mining-town hotel. Looking around her little seven-by-nine room Miss Millie discovered a bell-rope, and as she had some questions to ask in regard to the town and its inhabitants she gave a tug at the tassel, hoping to gain information from whoever answered the summons. She was not aware of the fact that on the average one might ring loud and often without attracting very much attention. As she was an exceptionally favored boarder, however, some one did answer the call. Pretty soon there was a soft scurrying of feet in the hall outside, the door flew open with a bang, and We Wailo hopped into the room, with a smile a yard long on his face.

"Bell lingee; We Wailo allee loundee. What for 'Melican glil lingee?"

Millie looked thoughtfully at the Chinaman.

She was in search of a true knight, but evidently We Wailo would not entirely fill the bill, though he had given evidence of being something beyond the average Celestial.

She had not forgotten the affair with the road-agents; and, besides, a man who could so quickly find a place in Bunco, and so suddenly dispose of such a dangerous character as Senor Pereira appeared to be, was certainly a man of resource and nerve even if his muscle was small. Nevertheless, though he might be able to take care of himself, the prejudice against his race was likely to be such that it would be unprofitable to attempt to bring him peculiarly into her service.

With all this in mind Miss Vandeleur decided on a few questions.

Nothing loth We Wailo listened and kept up his end.

"I did not think I would be apt to see much of you after we had reached our journey's end, but it seems that we are fated to be under the same roof. How did you manage to get a footing here so soon? I suppose you understand?"

"We Wailo sabbe eblee timee. Him ketchee light onee. Much likee 'Melican manee's cat; on him feet eblee timee. Jefferson wantee good manee; We Wailo lightee in town."

"The facts speak for themselves, though I would not otherwise have believed it possible. I begin to think, too, that we are more indebted to you than I first understood in the matter of the road-agents. It does seem as though you and that man with the whip were the only persons possessed of true courage. Were you not afraid to run the risks of such odds? Even that self-styled desperado, Plumb Center Pete was."

"We Wailo not flaiddee anyting hab hair. Him bellee big on shootee, top-side g'low, eblee timee. 'Melican glil sabbe?"

From some hidden receptacle in his raiment

We Wailo suddenly produced a brace of revolvers, which he flourished around in a very loose and unorthodox fashion, the muzzles covering in succession the door, the window, and finally Miss Vandeleur herself.

That young lady did not seem as nervous as might have been expected. She simply waved her hand, with a gesture that might indicate satisfaction or anything else.

"That will do: I have no doubt but that you can use your weapons well enough on a proper occasion but there is no use for them now. Put them up and listen. From some things I have seen I believe that you are disposed to be my friend."

"Hai-yah! We Wailo fl'end whattim he can. Lookee out numpa one come topside. 'Melican glil next. Dat allo plopla pidgin. Eh?"

"Yes, that is all right. Look out for number one first; and after that, my interests come next. I believe you are willing to aid me, and I may call on you and I will pay you well for whatever favors I may ask."

"We Wailo no takee wun piecee tin candaroon. Him hab nip te kashe, much plenty g'low. Him flin, 'way uppee."

And to show his earnestness the Chinaman drew from a pocket a handful of coin, gold and silver, and held them out.

"Thank you, I believe you without that; but I would prefer to pay you, nevertheless, when I put your friendship to this test, as I think of doing even now. You remember the man with the whip, do you not?"

We Wailo's smile faded into a look of grave attention, as he nodded and stood in a listening attitude.

"Do you think you could find him and bring him where I could have a few moments' conversation with him?"

"You betee. Bling him this side bellee quick. Hai!"

"Do so then—say in an hour from now. I would have a little quiet conversation with him, observed by no one. Suppose you tell him that I will be watching for him, and if he passes along the street I will give him a hint of where we may have our conference unobserved."

We Wailo snapped his fingers, nodded, and left the room with a hop, step and jump. He asked no further questions, and set out on his errand as though the affairs of George Washington Jefferson and his hotel, were a very secondary matter. As he had prudently learned in advance of his arrival the names of the different proprietors who would furnish second-class accommodations, his quest for Tenderfoot Tom was not so likely to prove vain. As he had the names he only had to look for locations, and Bunco was not so large that he would have much trouble.

In about fifteen minutes he came hopping back, and after a prudent rap stuck his head in at Miss Millie's door.

"We Wailo finishee first chop. Tellee grasswood man, glil hab pidgin inside he mouth, him ko-hom. Grasswood man say man-man heapee hungley, ko-hom by'mby, soon. Allee lightee. We Wailo be loundee ch'hoy! Hiyah!"

With the parting and meaningless interjections the Chinaman took himself off, and Miss Vandeleur waited some little time, now and then glancing uneasily out of the windows.

It was growing darker than she had expected and the hour was somewhat late for a lonely promenade through Bunco.

Her nerve did not fail her. Something like half an hour later she slipped noiselessly out without stopping to inform Mr. Allbright of where she was going.

As her door closed behind her a man leaned from the window of the next little coop of a room, and whispered to another man, who was lounging below:

"Eyes open, pard, she's a-comin'. Do yer ugly best ter keep on her trail, fur I tell yer she means bizzness, sure. I'll be down behind her ef she don't gimme ther slip."

There had been an unsuspected listener to the conversation, and Miss Vandeleur was already a marked young woman.

The eavesdropper was cautious enough about being seen. It was certain that if his presence was noticed any further information could not be gained in the same way.

It was not Pereira, however.

This man would make two of the senor; and he was American by birth beyond a doubt. He was a tall, well-built man, with a keen gray eye, who had been an inmate of the Jefferson House for a week or more, and was known by the name of Kale Carter. Who he really was and where he came from were questions that hardly troubled the people of Bunco, since he had not, so far, troubled them very seriously; but they had their suspicions. A man of keen locks, who appeared to have no especial interest in the regular business of the place was more than likely to be a gambler, and might be awaiting a favorable opportunity to set up for a chief. If he should turn out to be a real bad man no one would be very much surprised.

Kale Carter came out into the hall with a step even lighter than that of Millie Vandeleur.

There was a miserable little lamp burning in the now darkened and deserted corridor and

the man gave an anxious glance toward the further end.

To his surprise the girl had already vanished.

He had wished to time his exit so as to be able to catch a glimpse of her in the distance; but she had been quicker or he slower than he supposed.

A low growl of disgust came from his throat; but he hastily closed his door and started in pursuit.

As she was out of sight no particular caution was now needed, and he dashed along the hall at so rapid a rate that he did not notice the sudden appearance of a shadow in the dimness until he came in sudden and violent collision with a man who had emerged from one of the rooms along the hall.

Kale Carter was decidedly the heaviest weight, and of course the other man went down; but somehow in the going his feet flew out and his legs became entangled with those of Carter, so that the two fell headlong.

"Good gracious, ah!" exclaimed the under man, in a tone that was very suggestive of his having been sat down on. "Where, oh, where are you going?"

"I'm goin' fur your necktie," growled the other, as he sprung up, and swung one foot back, with the evident desire of kicking the life out of the unknown man who had caused his downfall.

The kick was given, and was followed by a howl—from the giver, as his toes struck the wall.

To his disgusted surprise the intended recipient had been a shade the quickest, and scrambling out of the way had darted into his own room and slammed the door shut behind him with an energy that showed that he believed his life to be in serious danger.

Kale Carter's hand went down to his hip and he hesitated a moment, while a look of wrath convulsed his features.

There was no better way in the world to drive him wild than to slip out unhurt after such a ridiculous imbroglio. If he had not had an urgent call in the other direction, he would probably have forgotten prudence and gone to get even.

As it was, he only hesitated for a moment. A shot through the door would be unsatisfactory, besides bringing a crowd around him, which was the last thing that he wanted.

"Never mind. You're the high old sport in spectacles. I ain't time ter bust ther door down now, but I'll git even with yer yit. Ef I don't it'll be because yer scalp won't pull. You git afore I kim back er I'll skin yer alive."

The last words were flung back over his shoulder, as he hurried away.

The time already lost was at the moment when it could be the least spared. When Kale Carter struck the street, Millie Vandeleur had been swallowed up in the darkness, and he had no idea in which direction she had gone.

"Ther luck has been coming my way, an' ef ther bottom ain't dropped out I reckon ther plan are ter bang straight ahead. I can't go wrong. Ef I do Billy 'll be thar on ther trail. Cuss him, ther trouble are I daren't b'leve him on oath. I ought to have been around so that he couldn't ring in a bouncer on me. Ah!"

As he hurried along, Carter had been communing with himself at length, but somewhat after the foregoing fashion.

Now he stopped suddenly. Billy Gray was in front of him, crouching low, with both hands pressed against his face, while he was struggling to repress the groan that was trying to break out.

Some men might have hesitated over the identity of the person thus found; but Kale Carter was not for an instant at a loss. He strode forward and his fingers sunk deeply into the shoulder of Gray as he caught him, and shook him like a terrier worrying a rat.

"What in the fiend's name are this, Bill Gray? Have yer let 'em skip, er did they put up some game on yer? What is it? Speak quick. Which way did they go?"

"Hanged ef I know," answered the other in a lower tone. "Ef yer kin show me I'll give yer a sight fur yer money, an' turn up a dead tenderfoot fur stakes. Curse 'em, ther flat with ther whip, muster smelled a mouse fur he brung ther lash down on sight, an' then him an' ther gal skipped! Kin yer hear 'em? It's on'y a minnit ago, an' they can't be fur."

"Hear them, no; but they kin hear you. You kin bet they'll lay low. The game's up, now, an' we may as well go back before they find out who we are. But I would have given a slug to know what she'll say to that long-legged galoot."

"Git yer slug ready, then; fur I'll tell yer when I kim back. I'm hard ter beat. An' I've got it in fur that tenderfoot; and when yer see him lyin' 'round in ther mornin' with his throat cut wide open don't yer say a word. Billy Gray's bin thar."

"Kill him if you want to, but hands off the girl. We'll make a try to find 'em. You go that way, an' I'll go this, an' keep yer ears open. Here goes."

The low-voiced conversation ceased and the two men left the spot, going in different directions.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS VANDELEUR'S CONFIDENTIAL AGENT.

BILLY GRAY hardly cared to explain to his partner the precise nature of the way in which he had been taken in. Miss Vandeleur had left the Jefferson House some little distance behind her before she became aware of the fact that she was followed. In his eagerness Gray had crowded up too close, and when she halted he came so suddenly upon her that she gave a little scream of alarm.

He was surprised himself, and answered with a rough growl.

Then the whip fell, sharp as a knife-stroke; and Miss Vandeleur vanished.

Tom Bowers showed that he was not by any means an idiot, whether he was or was not a tenderfoot. He caught the young lady by the arm—though she already recognized him—and drew her away, without a word.

The two walked rapidly, making a turn or so, and by the time that Kale Carter had learned that his game had, for the present, escaped him, they were well away.

"Follered yer, did he? Blast him, I'll bet rocks I marked his ugly mug. I ain't much on ther shoot, an' I don't keer fur a row, but I kin just swing a whip nasty. Now, miss, beggin' yer pardon, I'm in town; what's ther round up? That Chinaman's pigin-English ain't none of the plainest, an' I don't know whether I sized up ther rights ov it er not. Ez nigh ez I could make out, you want ter talk at me a leetle, an' I'm willin'. Drive on."

"Thank you for the permission. I suppose he told you that I wanted or might want to secure your services."

"That's what got me. I ain't the sorter man you'd be wantin'. I kin sling a whip an' drive mules, that's 'bout all. I reckon you ain't goin' inter stock very heavy; an' ef yer war I couldn't do yer no good in ther long run. I've got er boss on ther way ez I'm jest a-waitin' on—Kunnel Johnson. Mebbe you've heerd on him?"

"I am sorry to say I have not."

"He's a good man, he is; one to tie to every time. He sent me word ter try Walnut Bar an' then lie 'round Bunco 'bout this time, an' he'd be thar. He's sorter dependin' on me, don't yer see, an' I wouldn't go back on him fur no money."

"But meantime you would have no objections to enter my service if I paid well enough? Perhaps you might find it to your interest, even, to furnish your friend, the colonel, with a substitute if he came before my object in visiting this place was obtained."

Miss Millie's smile was entirely thrown away in the darkness, but something of its sweetness was in her voice, and Tom Bowers would have been more than an ordinary man if he had not felt it.

He hesitated a little, however.

"Don't yer see, it wouldn't look well fur me to be crackin' my whip fur another party when ther kunnel kin in. He'd think I'd throwed him off, sure. An' I'd hate ther dangedest ter hev ter quit a job jest when I war a-whoopin' 'em inter ther pen. No. I'm afeared it won't work. What yer want me ter do?"

There was a quick change in his voice that indicated a sudden wavering in his purpose.

Miss Vandeleur marked it, but at that minute had her own doubts, and she answered slowly:

"There is a good deal of truth in what you say. A person who goes in with me must stay with me clear to the end. And yet I had hoped for—even counted on—your assistance."

"I ain't much of a man, miss, beggin' yer pardon; an' I'm afeared I wouldn't do yer much good, unless it war on mules."

"How about two-legged mules?"

"I ain't a-sayin', miss—they ain't in my line. Ther kunnel allers manages them. I ain't a shuter. When there's a ruction I gets in what work I kin with ther whip, an' then gits under ther table. There's heaps better men than me. Why, bless yer soul, ther fellers call me ther Flat from Walnut Bar a'ready. I heared 'em while my back war turned, an' I s'pose they'd jest ez soon do it afore my face. I don't want ter take hold unless yer sure I kin fill ther bill. What kinder two-legged mules yer mean? Ef yer confides in me you kin bet I'll never tell."

"I believe in you that much, though I hardly believe the first part of what you have said. You were pointed out, by one who ought to know, as a man with a record; and your courage since then—first, in the stage, and second, in the quick, resolute way you dealt with that villain, leads me to suspect that you either are not doing yourself justice, or have some reason for concealing your identity."

"Now, in plain words, what I want is this—and mind you, I am willing to take you entirely at a venture. Perhaps you have come to Bunco with a purpose—I certainly have. It is not very probable that our interests will clash. Tonight, for instance, I came out alone and apparently unprotected. I expect to do so again, and more than once. For one thing, I want to have you around to see that no harm comes to me. Whip, fists or pistols—I am not particular how you dispose of the enemies who may arise in my path."

"Ef I war goin' ter stay in Bunco, that would be jest my name. I am sure I'd try ter be 'round every time."

"But I want ter hev a good send-off. Gimme ther drop on 'em, an' I kin bring 'em right up to ther rack; when they git ther drop on me, I sing—oh, lordy, so small. What else?"

"You can make researches that I cannot. I have even an idea that you are particularly fitted for the part of a detective. I will confide in you even more than I had at first intended to do. Nearly twenty years ago there was a tragedy of some kind enacted near Bunco. It was a long time back, but I must know its true history."

"Twenty year are consider'ble bigness ov time, an' it ain't hard ter furgit a heap in that long. Fact are, miss, I wouldn't take a story on George Washington's oath twenty year after it happened!"

"I know that it is discouraging, but I have taken an oath myself, and it is one that I shall keep at all hazards. There were half a dozen men concerned in the affair, as I now believe, though some may have been innocent and some guilty, some on one side and some on the other."

"Gimme the names, then; an' ther p'int. I'll do what I kin."

"There was an Edmund Farrell, that was killed; and a Hunter Browne that profited by his death. There was a Huldah Waring, sister to the dead man, and two children of Farrell. There was a detective who hunted him to his death, and a lawyer named Bradley, who drew his will. Between them all, they know the truth, and I must learn it. And I must know what has become of Edmund Farrell's fortune, and the children that were to inherit it."

"A purty good job fur ther Flat from Walnut Bar."

The man laughed low, as though the idea of turning him into a detective was amusing, but not altogether unpleasant.

"I've bin wantin' ter see ef I ain't good fur somethin' besides mules, an' here's ther chance. Count me in. Now, I should jedge it's time ter be gittin' back towards ther Jefferson House. I don't s'pose yer left word at ther office that yer were goin' out, an' ef yer are missed, there'll be a lively ole racket. One thing more, though. I'll keep my ears open fer them ez you named; but it 'pears ter me ef you kin pump George Jefferson, you kin git ez much satisfaction to ther square inch outen him, ez outen ther rest ov ther town put tergether. He's bin hyar since ther first rush."

"Thank you for the suggestion; it is a good one, and I will follow it out."

"Don't rush matters. Mebbe he's one o' them kind ez talks when nobody wants ter listen, an' when they does is dumb ez a clam."

"Right again. Oh, I was not mistaken, I see, when I came to you for aid. I have much I might say but this is not the time or the place. Come, walk with me as far as the hotel. I really care not who meets me now."

"Mebbe you don't, but I can't say I've any use fur the feller I stroked with this ole mule-compeller. If I didn't cut his eyes out it wouldn't be wonderful ef he war layin' fur me. Ef so, an' it's all ther same ter you, I guess I'll retire on sight."

"Do as you choose; I have confidence in your courage and skill. When I want to see you again I will send the Chinaman for you. When he says come, do not hesitate."

After all, the interview had been rather a tame one; but Miss Millie had had an access of caution after setting out; and she had evidently said enough to throw Tom Bowers into a high state of excitement.

Now, as they had got off pretty well toward the edge of town, they turned about and began to make their way straight toward the Jefferson House.

They saw nothing of the two spies, and came almost within stone-throw of the hotel without interruption.

Then Bowers began to sniff suspiciously.

"'Pears ter me ef I'm goin' inter this hyer thing ther less you an' me is seen tergether ther better chance ther be all 'round; this hyer's fur enough. I'll stand an' watch, an' ef ary thing turns up in course I'll come gallopin' up, an' that's 'bout ther best we kin do. Ez fur ther collater'l you was talkin' ov, thinkin' it over maybe it 'ud be kinder better ef you'd make a small deposit, jest ez an encouragement, you know."

Miss Vandeleur was not at all surprised. She had not much believed in his protestations of disinterestedness, though the change of base was a little more sudden than she had looked for.

Without hesitation she held out her hand, with a gold coin between her fingers.

"Don't misunderstand me. I have no money to throw away, and I do not expect to pay more than your services may be worth. Here is what I think I can afford as a pledge of my intentions; after this you will get what you earn, perhaps a little more. You can go back now as soon as you choose; you have already set me on a trail that I want to follow up myself, and I leave it to your own judgment in what direction you are to work. Good-night!"

Bowers stared after her as if puzzled, until he had seen her run nimbly up the steps of the hotel.

Then he wheeled.

As he did so a powerful hand dropped on his shoulder, seizing it with a gripe of iron, while in front of him another man rose up and dashed straight at his throat.

"Ho, ho, Mister Man! we hev you anyhow, an' it'll be dog-goned curious ef we don't git right down ter bed-rock now! Bunco's a durned sickly place fur a sneakin' spy ov a detective ter put up in, an' you'll wish you'd 'a' farmed out ther job ter some one else afore yer gits through with it. I'll git even fur that lick, too, afore ye'r many hours older. Jest lift yer feet now, an' kim right erlong!"

The speaker was Billy Gray; and from the way he tightened his hold on Tenderfoot Tom's throat, it was evident that the very feel of the flesh did his soul good.

The Flat from Walnut Bar was taken so wholly by surprise that he was completely in the toils before he had a chance to begin resistance.

The gripe on his throat grew tighter, and the man at his back transferred his grasp from shoulder to elbows, growling out in an undertone:

"Dry up, Billy; you talk too much with yer moult! As fur you, if you make a sound I'll lift ther whole top of yer brain-pan—you understand? Come along with us; we have a leetle matter of business ter talk over, and here ain't the place to do it. Let up on him, Billy; you choke too hard. If you shut off his wind, ther next thing we know he won't know nothin'."

Even when Gray loosened his gripe, Tom Bowers could do nothing; and to tell the truth, he did not seem very anxious to make any effort.

The suddenness of the attack had unmanned him, and its violence almost rendered him speechless. He just dropped into his captors' arms, and allowed them to propel him forward at their own sweet will.

What fate was in store for him he did not ask, but he rather thought he was going like a lamb to the slaughter, and had about as much volition as a thoroughly drunken man has going down a steep hill. The man behind him pushed him forward, and Billy Gray, who had produced and cocked a revolver, trotted at his side.

But as he went along he was made conscious of a sudden diversion in his favor. There was a snap behind him, something less than the report of a pistol, and the two hands loosened from his elbows, as their owner fell against him with a force that almost knocked him from his feet.

"Run!" shouted some one in his rear, as Billy Gray went to grass from a second blow that followed only an instant after the first.

Then some one caught him again by the elbows, whirling him around and propelling him back toward the heart of the town.

This time the grasp was a friendly one; and without stopping to learn from whom it came, he took the advice, and got over the ground with long strides that rapidly bore him away from the spot.

The grasp on his arms remained there, however, and his unseen friend followed with a lock-step that made him seem part of the same machine.

A few moments later, Tenderfoot Tom halted under the glare of a huge red lantern. At the same time the hands dropped away from his arms, while he heard a voice that was not altogether unknown to him.

"We Wallo allee loundee, muchee toposide glow eblee timee, first chop etlikee allee samee 'Melican man."

The Chinaman was very much around, and stood there laughing, while Bowers panted for breath.

CHAPTER VIII.

DUTCH COURAGE.

AFTER some minutes, Kale Carter recovered his senses sufficiently to scramble to his feet. Though his head was by no means clear, he could understand without any questions what had happened to him.

Some one had applied a hard fist to the back of his head with such force that it seemed to him the bones must be cracked. With one hand he rubbed his eyes; with the other he jerked out a revolver, cocking it as it came. It was on a level with a dark form in front of him, and it was only a chance that he had not pulled the trigger before he discovered that the dark figure belonged to the disconsolate Billy Gray.

"Fire and furies!" he groaned out.

"Who did it? Curse you, can't you speak? Which way did they go?"

"Dunno. They've fired an' fell back. I sh'd jedge it war a man with a sledge-hammer; an' he meant ter drive us inter keep. Anyways, they're both gone."

"Both? There were a dozen of 'em. Cusses on 'em, I feel as though I'd been trampled to death with wild mules. Why didn't you shoot? If I'd had a cocked pistol out it seems to me I'd

have had a corpse er two to show for the frolic."

"Mebbe so; but I didn't see nothin' ter shute at. I reckon they must 'a' come outen a b'loon. No use ter cuss me. You had yer claws on him; what yer let go fur? Bet yer sweet life yer can't take him in that way ag'in. It war a slick job, spilled in ther finishin'-touches, an' we may ez well bunch ther kierds now."

"Bunch be banged!" growled the other, and he had in a great measure changed the tone of his voice.

"I'll have his scalp on my belt afore midnight. I'll show him a thing er two—"

"A durned pity it would be that he couldn't see it when you got through. But ef yer lay fur him ter-night how much will yer know about him ter-morrer? I'd 'a' bin willin' ter send him right up ther flume when we tackled him ef yer hadn't sed, lay low till we kin git some p'int."

"That's so," answered Carter, more calmly.

"We know ther size of his lay-out, an' next time we won't do any fool's work. Kill him on sight ef we git ther chance, an' skeer ther facts outen ther girl. I feel it in my bones they're settin' up a double game. I half-b'lieve Trouble bez sold us out. I got word, straight as a die, that Johnny Short wer' down this way. Trouble ain't ther man ter make a divvy on a hundred thousand ef he kin git out. Ther pile's too big. I wouldn't wonder ef he war sellin' gal, gray-beard an' ther gang, an' I know ther gal's tryin' ter sell him. S'posin' ther flat were Johnny Short, after all. Eh?"

"Now yer shoutin'! Anyway, he's somewhere in Banco, an' I ax nothin' better than to find him afore mornin'. Ef it's a straight killin' match it won't be hard ter pick a row, an' I'm hyer ter take ther job, I tell yer. I want ter git even fur that whip work, an' I'm goin' ter do it. Men ner angels can't stop me ag'in, an' you needn't try, Kale Carter."

"Don't be alarmed. I've been there once. Shoot him on sight, if you choose, but look out fer yer own precious neck. I can't afford ter lose a man like you. I've got something to get even fer, too; and I tell you, when Banco sees how I do it, they'll just all howl. You hear me?"

There was no trouble about hearing him, either.

The two men were in deadly earnest this time, and Tenderfoot Tom had two enemies on his trail who meant murder from the word go.

Meantime, while Tom Bowers was recovering his wind, We Wallo had quietly slipped away. When the Flat from Walnut Bar looked around him he discovered that he was alone.

"So ther Chinaman war around ag'in?" he observed to himself. "Wouldn't 'a' thunk it ov no leetle heathen like him ter bit so straight from ther shoulder, but they do say ther's some orful sluggers among 'em, an' I'll b'lieve it after this. Now, whar am I; an' what's ther next racket in ther bunch?"

The red light above his head was a sign manual of what was behind it, and the Flat from Walnut Bar considered a moment, and then went in. There was such an air of Sabbath stillness about the place that he was of the opinion it must be a safe resort. If his company was not wanted they could fire him out—a catastrophe that had occurred to him more than once before in such establishments.

As he pushed open the door he saw that he had not been mistaken in the character of the establishment.

The building was a stylish one, with a large main room, from which several smaller ones were reached by side doors.

At one end there was a bar; through the open doors various parties could be seen, engaged in games of cards. Along the front of the bar a party of half a dozen was ranged, sampling the liquid lightning specially distilled for the patrons of Hazard Hall. Everything was quiet and orderly, and just at that moment there was no one but himself going in or out.

Tenderfoot Tom had learned a thing or two, and when he ambled up to the bar he cast an insinuating look at those already standing there.

"Jine?" he said briefly, with a wave of his hand toward the array of bottles behind the bar.

"Our name, stranger," answered the nearest of the half-dozen.

"Set 'em up, then, barkeep'. Accordin' ter my means I'm ez lib'ral ez they make 'em, when I strike or new town. When I seen ther light I thort thar mout be fun inside an' drifted in. That's all right, ain't it?"

"Ef it ain't we're ther boyees ter make it right; ain't we Jimmy?"

The appeal to the bartender was followed by a laugh and a nod.

"Ef I didn't say yes you'd mop the floor up with me, eh? Oh, well, ez long ez ther stranger behaves hisself he's ez welcome hyar ez anywhar else. Take yer p'ison an' give some one else a chance."

The bottle was set out, and Tom Bowers and his newly-found friends imbibed and fell back, just as the door opened to admit a still later arrival.

A party came in, laughing and talking. In

the lead was Hunter Browne and Senor Pereira; while between them, coming quite reluctantly if looks went for anything, was Professor Elderberry. Behind this trio was Plumb Center Pete, and several of the regular loungers about the Jefferson House.

They did not approach the bar; but went through one of the side doors, into a room where most of the work done in Hazard Hall was got in.

"Did yer see them gerloots?" asked Big Frank, the leading spirit of the half dozen with whom Bowers had been drinking.

"They've got a victim in tow an' what he has in his pockets when he leaves this hyer s'loon wouldn't open a sweat cloth game at five cents a throw. It's a dog-gone shame."

One of the others made a low hissing sound with his lips, and jerked his thumb, in a covert sort of way toward Tom Bowers.

"Oh, we're all gentlemen hyer an' I don't reckon he's goin' ter be skeered at what I say. Kim along, an' we'll see what sorter game they set up. Cuss 'em, we may wring in yet afore everythin' 's played out."

Big Frank led the way into the room, already in the tenacity of Hunter Browne and his friends, as well as others.

The bartender looked uneasily in this direction, but said nothing to them. The gambling-rooms were out of his direct jurisdiction, anyhow, and from what has already been seen it is doubtless evident that he had no desire for a row. He had not heard the conversation since the gang stood a little apart, and talked in low tones, that did not reach his ears with any plainness; but he had his suspicions.

In their anxiety to see what Hunter Browne and party were up to Big Frank and his men overlooked the fact that Tom Bowers dropped back; and when they had preceded him, he turned and went to the bar.

"Nothin' like the last," he said, without raising his voice more than was necessary.

"An' ez ther room's purty nigh ter empty an' them ez are hyer are strangers, s'pose yer jine me yerself."

The barkeeper nodded, set out the glasses in an abstracted sort of way, and made a semblance of drinking; but all the time his eyes were toward the still open door.

"Purty friendly sort ov fellers," said Bowers, indicating the set by a motion of his thumb. "Seem ter hev ther centerest ov every critter's welfare under ther wests. What sort be that Big Frank, anyhow?"

"Young man," answered Jimmy, solemnly, "ef yer knows when yer're well off yer'll leave Big Frank alone. He's a chief, he is; an' ef he takes ther notion ter begin ter shoot he won't keer er Continental ef yer' standin' right in ther way. I'd give a dollar, right now, ef he war somewhere else. He an' his gang looks purty much ez ef they're ready fur ther rampage, an' ef they start on ther war-path yer kin expect ter see things bust. If I war you I'd jest slip right out an' git whar he can't find yer fur I tell yer, he's marked yer fur his game."

"He's a bad man, is he?" asked Bowers, with enlarged interest.

"Bad! that ain't no name for it. He's jest Satan on wheels. An' he's a boss—ther's no use tryin' ter go back on that. He kin draw an' plug quicker, shoot funder and plumb center than the man wot invented sixes. He's got it in him fur Mr. Browne, I'm afeard, an' I only wish I could tip him the wink."

"What's ter hinder?" asked the Flat from Walnut Bar, with innocent surprise.

"Ef yer ain't no one ter leave in yer place I'll tend bar till you kin back."

"You be gosh blamed. Big Frank's ter hinder. If he seen me doin' a thing of the kind he'd object mighty hard. An' when he objects somethin' drops."

"Oh, I guess he ain't that bad. I'll tell him ef yer'll pint out ther one yer call Hunter Browne."

"You dry up, won't you? Ef yer' a nat'ral born fool try an' not show it. Ef Frank would go fur me he'd jest slaughter you. Why, when he winks in this camp, every man thet sees it jest hes ter blow his nose."

"Oh, git out! Yer think I'm going ter stand by an' see a man murdered 'bout giving 'im warnin'. Jest watch me an' see how a man kin git 'round it. I ain't afeard, I tell yer. I jest wish Kunnel Johnson war hyer. He'd make that rooster wilt down. An' ef they tetch me they'll hev the kunnel in the'r wool, so they will; an' ef they say anything ter me that's jest what I'll tell 'em. So long. I'm goin' fur ther tiger."

The bad whisky was probably beginning to work, for with a parting wave of his hand, the flat from Walnut Bar staggered away toward the card-room.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT HARVARD TEACHES ABOUT EUCHER.

BOWERS found that the room in which he passed was not near as large as the bar-room, and that it was quite well filled. Quiet as everything had been there was somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty players, at a number of tables, and behind every player there

was a friend or two, who was looking over his shoulder and giving hints as to the safest plan. Hunter Browne and his set had already got to work.

From appearances an expert would have been apt to judge that either Browne had been warned or something had arisen to excite his suspicions. He sat in one corner of the room, between the table and the wall, and there was a window near, that, in case of need, would furnish an excellent line of retreat. Pereira sat next to him, on the one side, and Plumb Center Pete on the other, while nearest to the crowd was Professor Elderberry, who looked as little at home as a hog on ice.

The game had already opened, though it was not running altogether smoothly.

Not that there was any difficulty about money matters; for very little of that was going, and the playing was seemingly more for amusement than for anything else. No one was going to be very badly hurt as long as it was four-handed eucher, at fifty cents a corner.

"Indeed, gentlemen," the professor said, as Hunter Browne gave a grunt of disgust at a movement of his, "I would a good deal sooner look on. Why, I haven't touched a card since I left college; and somehow the games have changed since then. They don't play them now as they did there; I've got an assisting hand, and of course I assisted; and now Mr. Browne says I ought to have kept my mouth shut till it was my turn to cross the suit. I don't understand what he means."

"Don't be worried, professor," answered Hunter Browne, more amicably.

"In those days, I suppose, when your partner assisted you could go it alone; but we don't play that way here. With a bower up if you couldn't go alone you ought to give me a chance, or lay back for a eucher when they made it next. I guess we'll manage to make a point between us."

The game then went on, and the parties scarcely suspected that the amiable altercation had attracted any attention.

Big Frank and his pals were taking it all in, though.

"What fur confounded anamile are he, anyhow?" growled one of the men at Frank's heels. "I'll be durned ef he ain't got a b'iled shirt on, an' I wouldn't put it past him ter mount a plug hat an' begin ter rustle 'round town fur a boss. Shoot ther cuss! It 'ud do me good ter see even Hunt Browne go through him."

Tom Bowers was where he could overhear, and his good intentions were not checked much when these words fell on his ears. He slipped past, and before any one had noticed him he had edged in behind Plumb Center Pete, so as to be near enough to Hunter Browne to speak in a low tone if he could once attract his attention.

Before making any efforts in that direction, he took a glance around at the hostiles.

He saw that Big Frank had noted his appearance then; but in addition he saw a pair of very fierce gray eyes fixed upon him with an angry stare that was enough to make the cold chills run up and down his back. Mr. Kale Carter had tracked him down, and was standing there, looking at him in a way that seemed to say he was ready to begin business very shortly.

"Two points," said Hunter Browne, turning the deuce of clubs up over the last spot on the tray to indicate four.

"If my partner hadn't been quite so fresh we'd have spelled O-U-T, in big letters. But we're in luck, so what's the difference about the playing. Go ahead, Pereira, and deal."

The Mexican drew the cards together and began a shuffle, while Plumb Center Pete had time to look around him.

The very first thing, his glance rested on Tom Bowers.

At the sight his eyes opened widely.

"Well, I'll be durned!" he exclaimed, a grin of pleasure lighting up his face. "Ef it ain't Tenderfoot Tommy, ther Flat from Walnut Bar. An' he's 'live an' kickin'! Shake, ole man. Yer did yerself proud out thar among ther road-agents, and I've been wantin' to say so."

He held out his hand with such an undeniably friendly air that Bowers grasped it on sight.

"Whar did yer git to, Tommy? I looked round ther Jefferson, fur it war my treat. I put ther beathen right inter a soft place, an' mebbe I c'd 'a' wrung you in somewhar till that kunnel ov yourn gits 'round. How in creation did yer git hyer, though? I tell yer don't slide out now. I want ter talk at yer by-an-by. Jest now— I pass."

He had mechanically gathered up his cards with his left hand and given a glance at them.

Pereira scowled—both at Bowers and his partner. He was known as an eager player, for any sized stakes, and the levity that would allow a man like Tenderfoot Tom to take the attention that should be fixed solely on the board was simply disgusting.

"That's good enough for me," interposed Browne, in good humor. "Take it up—and, as there is a natural, it's hardly worth while to play the hands out."

"By the livin' jingo, Pereira, they're too much for us. I must be bad medicine fur you."

for I can't keep my end up, an' yourn are beginnin' ter stop over. Say, hyer's jest about a match fur Goggle George, an' I'm goin' ter give him my cheer till I see how ther keards run. We'll be settlin' down ter draw next, an' then it won't be so purty ter hold all pot-keards an' no two alike."

Pete Blocky was in the best of good-humors, but he meant what he said. Rising, he caught Bowers by the shoulders and forced him down into the seat just vacated.

"Gents, this hyer's Tenderfoot Tom, ther man with nerve an' a whip, an' ther Flat from Walnut Bar. Don't fool yerselves on him, though, fur he means biz all ther time, an' kin get in from ther word go. Fur keards I jest opine he's about er match fur ther professor, an' I want ter see 'em at it. Tommy, this hyer's Manuel Pereira, ther chap what owns ther on-derived half-interest, spot cash, ov Bunco; an' this hyer's Hunter Browne, ez owns ther rest. Jawge Elderberry an' you hev met afore."

Tenderfoot Tom smiled at large. He dropped his whip from under his arm to a position across his lap, and laid his bony hands on the table.

"I ain't ser sure ez I kin do justice ter ther keards like Pete, but I'm allers agreeable ter try. I ain't broke yet, an' when I are I'll jest squeal an' drop out. Ther kunnel'll be 'round soon, an' he'll see ez I don't suffer."

Then he leaned over toward Browne, and looking him straight in the eye, added in a low whisper:

"Keep yer peepers peeled. Big Frank, there, an' his gang, is a-layin' fur yer, an' I said I'd tip yer ther wink."

"Can't say that I ever seen you afore," answered Browne, with seeming irrelevance, and in a loud key.

"An' I don't know who you mean by the colonel; but strangers that do the square thing are always welcome at Bunco. Now let's have more cards and less chin music—Elderberry, go ahead with your deal."

Pete Blocky had not risen with the intention of watching the game, and he at once drifted out into the other room, leaving his friends to their fate. It was likely that his bringing in Bowers was more in the nature of a practical joke on Pereira, than anything else. He knew his own value as a partner in a game that gradually increased in interest; and that the Mexican capitalist would do anything but relish the change after the introduction he had given the new man.

Every one else was satisfied, or appeared to be, so there was no room for complaint until it was proved how interesting Bowers could make things. At the admonition of Browne the professor began to shuffle, and then the play went on.

Pete Blocky had held no great cards, but he had at least played them for all they were worth; Tenderfoot Tom held a little more than the average hands, and couldn't have played them worse if he had tried. Of course no one but Bowers knew the secret of his own nervousness, for no one else noted Kale Carter's black looks, or was aware of the little controversy that had been going on not long before at the edge of the town. If they had it is likely they would have been puzzled to know what was the secret of the delay. Kale Carter was one that looked as though he would hardly let his vengeance cool; yet something there evidently was to make him hesitate. He looked more keenly than ever at Tenderfoot Tom.

A hand dropped lightly on his shoulder, and turning he found Big Frank staring at him in a puzzled sort of way.

"Look hyer, a minute, pard," said Frank, with a j-rk of the head. "Are you after any ov those galoots? Ef yer be hyer's yer old side-pard, workin' on ther same level."

CHAPTER X.

KALE CARTER'S LITTLE GAME.

At the low-voiced suggestion, Kale Carter wheeled sharply.

"What's that? Say that ag'in an' say it slow."

"Slow er fast thar's not much in it, ef yer don't want ter hitch hosses an' make a team. Yer look ez though yer were itchin' fer ther doors ter open, an' I thort I wouldn't mind showin' yer a back way inter ther racket. It'll take keerful work ter crawl under ther canvas, fur thar's a couple men thar ez are lightnin' on ther draw."

"I'm after ther feller that jist sat down, ther rest I don't keer about. I'd hev hed him down afore this, only I don't like ter lead a picnic in a strange woods."

"Who ther thunder are he? I thort I know'd all ther bad men ther drift 'round these regions, but I'll be blest ef I know him. Ef he ain't a nat'ral born fool yer kin bet he ain't no slouch—I'll bet he ain't. Didn't he jest play it off up ter natur'?"

"Right you are. He's the kind that it ain't safe fur you an' me ter hev 'round."

"Ob, I kin see it. I'll bet rocks he's hard to hold! What's he been a-doin'? You ought ter know."

"Never mind that. I'm after him, and him only. I don't care a cuss fur ther rest. Now,

what's ther best way ter get a shy at him without stirrin' up Judge Lynch. I'm 'most a stranger here, an' I'm not sure how much Bunco'll stand."

"Ef you don't hit ther wrong man, an' make yer bet stiff enough, there's a good show ter bluff Bunco. They don't keer ter mix in a game where there's no profit. If that consarned flat war ther only man in ther case, I'd tell yer to wade right in. But there's a couple big men there that I'm layin' fur myself, an' it's best ter go a leetle slow. Ef yer wants ter know my idear, though, I kin give it to yer."

Kale Carter and this man had never met before, yet they fraternized at once, and Carter was honestly in earnest about taking advice from a kindred spirit. He nodded and whispered fiercely:

"Spit it out, then. I swear, he'll be half over ther range afore you begin to talk."

"Don't be flustered. I'm layin' fur ther other 'uns, but we may make a clean job of it. Me and my pards hyer hev been lookin' ther natter up, an' ther best thing we've struck is ter sit down at ther next table an' git up a leetle circus of our own. Then if you misses ther man yer plug at, an' hits ther pidgeon over thar—speshully ef you hes a clear case, es I kin make it fur you, it's yer own fault. I'm jest that had a man, an' that well known, that I don't keer what ther game is, I kin Kerry it through an' not be a durned bit further below par. Say, now, stranger, what be yer name, an' how much yer give me ef I set 'em up fur yer on a leetle game ov draw?"

"For my name, I've been around here long enough for you to know who Kale Carter is when you hear them talk about him; and as for the game, I'm willing to let you swindle me out of a hundred. After that, when you play an advantage I'll kick—and kick hard. I guess we all sabbe, and if we are going to do anything of the kind it is time that we begun."

Big Frank winked shrewdly.

"All right. I'd do it fur half that money; but you don't want him very bad er you'd offer twice that pile. Mebbe you ain't well heeled, yerself. If yer ain't we'll take yer note fur any balance you'd like ter throw in."

"Not a dime. It's not often I pay any man fer playing my game, but I'll do it to-night for more reasons than one, if you'll quit gasing and get to work."

"Work it is; an' thar's ther table we've bin a-waitin' fur. Squattyvoo, afore some 'un else slides in."

As if to help them the party at the very table which they were wishing to occupy rose—one or two of its members having so nearly gone burst that there was no fun in continuing the game.

"Hyar yer are, stranger," said Big Frank, in a tone loud enough to be heard by any listener.

"We don't offen take a dar' 'round hyer, an' me an' my pard, are jest men enough ter play yer anything from high, low, Jack to draw poke, till yer toe-nails drops off."

And seemingly touched by the bantering tone Kale Carter threw himself in the chair that faced the Hunter Browne party, while Big Frank and two of his pards occupied the remaining places.

Then the game began.

While this bit of by-play was going on, the Flat from Walnut Bar was so nearly on needles that it was a wonder the other players did not notice it. But when he saw Kale Carter and his men with whom he had been talking taking their places his game underwent a sudden and wonderful improvement. Hunter Browne, perhaps, guessed at the reason; but he said nothing, and probably did not suspect the whole truth.

Bowers in fact felt that immediate danger was over. Though for a little, he kept a cautious watch on the persons who were not so far away but that snatches of their conversation could be heard, yet after a time, when the fact was patent that luck was coming his way, he began to give his undivided attention to the work at hand.

As had been anticipated by more than one, Pereira proposed a change; and the result was that Tenderfoot Tom was holding wonderful hands, the professor was just about holding his own, while the more experienced players were losing about as heavily as they chose to put up their money.

At a sign from Big Frank a couple of his followers occupied positions between the two tables in such a manner as to keep the way cleared of every one else; and as they had an inkling of what was to happen it was probable that they would have gumption enough to get out of the road when the time came.

Big Frank understood that it would not be well to push on to the riot at once. It generally takes some drinking and considerable playing to get to the point they were waiting for. Before he had been playing very long he began to see that if he wanted any laurels in that game he would have to work all he knew how to win them.

"Say, Mister Man, you haven't been setting up any drop game on yours truly? You drew up

to thet pair like a major, and blame me, if I don't half expect yer hez roped me in, an' think ov raking up my shekels. This ain't ther fu'st time you've thumbed Satan's prayer-book."

"Not the first time; and I hope it will not be the last. If you're afraid draw out while you have the time. I tell you, I'm a rustler on wheels when I get to rolling down hill."

"I'll rustle yer; an' ef yer bin a-rustlin' me fur my stamps you'll be so sick to-morrer mornin' that yer won't know whar yer head is, an' wher's yer heels. You heer me?"

"I'm not deaf; and when any ole says cards they find me hard to beat. Ruffle off those pictures and let the sport proceed."

"Hyar they go, then. I thort mebbe you'd have nerve enough to lay up a leetle blind, some one, an' a couple straddles on top ov it. I want it lively while it lasts. What are yer all doin'?"

The different players threw in their discards, obtained the number they wanted, and opened up mildly. When Big Frank raised fifty dollars it looked as though he was bluffing, and when Kale Carter saw it and went fifty better it seemed as though he thought so, and had a tolerably good hand to ask the question on.

Big Frank looked over his cards once more and then saw the fifty and, went ten better.

"I'll see it," said Carter, throwing the ten carelessly down with the other stakes. "It's always worth while to find out on what kind of a hand a stranger wants to win your money."

"Three jacks," answered Frank, inquiringly, still keeping his cards in his hand.

"Good enough for me if you show 'em. I've got two pair."

"There they are," answered Big Frank, dropping the three high-heeled gentlemen, or their pictures, rather, upon the board, at the same time drawing in the pot.

As the others had staid out after the first fifty-dollar bet he was alone with the stranger.

"Hold on there. Drop that," said Carter sharply, half rising, and a fierce look in his eyes.

"I've got a hand that must talk for itself. Maybe it's bigger than I thought for—jest as you've got another jack, back."

"Don't keer a cuss what you've got back, er what I've got back. Ef yer two pair make four kings that's your loss, 'cause yer said that three jacks would take the money ef I showed 'em."

With provoking coolness Big Frank began to stuff the money, in his pocket.

"I'm not talking again. There's my two pair, and they just make four queens. If they don't lay over your jacks I want ther boss of ther house to say so, and, you drop that money out again while somebody that knows beans takes the matter all in. Drop it, you hear me?"

His voice suddenly raised from the guarded tone in which only it had been heard, and rung through the room, loud and firm.

At the same time his hand snatched hastily at his revolver, and his eyes, looking beyond Big Frank, rested in a piercing glance on Tenderfoot Tom.

It was a very pretty quarrel as it stood, for Big Frank's hands went pistolward at the same moment, and every lounge had his eyes on that table, just in time to see the two men spring— their feet and their hands go up.

CHAPTER XI.

SOMEBODY MOPS UP THE FLOOR AT HAZARD HALL.

KALE CARTER was no man's fool, and knew well enough what he could do with a snap shot at a dozen feet. He would have given big odds that Tenderfoot Tom would drop just after his hand went up.

And he never would have been worse fooled in his life.

The cry that he made to call the attention of the bystanders to the nature of his quarrel was his mistake, for it happened that at Hunter Browne's table a fresh deal was just in progress, and as Pereira was running off 'he cards Tenderfoot Tom was looking that way.

It may have been a premonition of danger; it may have been that his nerves were just in that condition when almost anything would startle them beyond control; it may have been that he had had his suspicions of the scheme. As Carter rose Bowers rose also, and, if anything, the quicker. His long form swayed forward, and then a dark, snake-like line shot forward and upward. There was a sharp crack: the lights seemed to shoot from where they were hanging up, against the ceiling, and then they came down to the floor with a flaming crash, just as there was the sound of half a dozen pistol-shots, followed swiftly by the jingle of breaking glass. By the merest chance, as it seemed, the lamps, that had been attached to a four-armed candelabrum, and suspended from the roof by a rope, were extinguished as they fell.

For a few moments the room remained in darkness, and pandemonium appeared in that time to have broken loose. There were shots, yells, curses, and furniture flew around promiscuously.

In the midst of it all the door leading into the large room, which, in some way had been closed, flew open, letting in a stream of light.

The lamps in the other room helped the matter somewhat; and Charley Cole, the proprietor, with a powerful bull's-eye in one hand and a navy revolver in the other, helped it still more. The firing ceased, and every one looked around curiously, to see what damage had been done.

Several minor individuals were more or less severely pinked, Kale Carter lay stretched motionless on the floor, his face covered with blood, Hunter Browne had a revolver aimed in perfect line for Big Frank's heart, and his finger on the trigger, while Pereira, Professor Elderberry and Tenderfoot Tom were missing.

"Glory Moses!" said Plumb Center Pete, pushing past Cole, and looking keenly around.

"What's all this, Browne? Looks ez though you'd throwed off on yer old side pard, an' started ther circus jest when he wern't 'round. Who's been ravin' round hyer in ther dark an' tryin' ter take yer buildin' down? Jest p'int him out an' you'll see him drop."

"Oh, dry up, Pete. I don't think there's any one much got hurt, unless it's that man on the floor; and a Philadelphia lawyer couldn't figure it out who hit him. Not me, for I've got all six barrels loaded yet, and I guess the shooting is over—unless Big Frank, over there, wants his checks called in. I had an idea he'd been looking my way, but I didn't want to shoot till I knew it."

"But whar's Pereira an' ther pefessor—an' ther Flat from Walnut Bar? Some on 'em must 'a' got left."

"I should judge that hole was about the size of their bigness. I heard the glass smash as some one put a chair through it, and that's the way they skipped."

"Tommy didn't, fur thar he goes now," responded Blockey, looking over his shoulder with a grin on his face, as Bowers, with his whip tucked under his arm, shot out from the corner behind the door, where he had been crouching, and scudded away without a word. Mr. Bowers was evidently more scared than hurt.

"Then Pereira and the professor went by the window, and I suppose it was the little Mexican that left his card for that gentleman with the sore head. I saw the flash just as Elderberry went through."

"An' wot war it all about?"

Blockey had edged his way over to Browne's side and their conversation was in a low, unexcited tone.

"That's what I'm thinking. Tom Bowers may be a flat, or a fool, or a tenderfoot from Walnut Bar or from 'way back, but I tell you he ain't a bad man to have in the house, and he knows how to take care of his own royal self about as well as the next man. He tipped me the wink that those galoots were after me, and just as they were sailing in he upset the lights with his whip and slid out of the way. It saved me the trouble of using the pill-boxes, and I sha'n't forget him in a hurry. But what's that? Our friend with the bloody nose is coming to. Either he hadn't any brains or Pereira didn't blow them all out. Queer, too. I never saw such luck as that—for, of course, that near, in the dark, he couldn't have done it on purpose. The Mexican ain't much of a shot, anyway."

"An' Goggle Gawge don't shoot at all, er this court don't know herself. Let's see whar he war plugged."

Kale Carter was really coming to his senses, and without having received any serious harm. A ball from some one's pistol had creased his head, cutting a small vein on his forehead, bringing the blood that covered his face.

As Plumb Center Pete came over to look at him he gathered himself up, staggering to his feet with one hand against the wall, while the other held the revolver from which his grip had never loosened.

"Where is he?" he mumbled thickly. "Did I bring him? Curse the bound! I'll have the soul out of him yet, if I didn't."

Then he glared around with rapidly increasing strength.

"When the lights went out," said Hunter Browne, with refreshing coldness, "you shot a little too high. You see, it takes practice to do neat work in the dark. Here's your mark. You can allow for variations better, the next time you try it on."

He pointed up at a bullet-mark in the wall, about on a level with the crown of his head as he stood up.

If Browne looked for any sudden explosion to follow he was very much mistaken.

With something like a snort of disgust Kale Carter turned away.

"Ef ye'r lookin' fur Big Frank I seen him a-goin' out ther door a bit ago ez though he hed bizzness up street. Go fur him ef yer want ter ketch him."

Plumb Center Pete's suggestion hit the right cord, for, without a word of response, Carter staggered off, his revolver still out and cocked.

"Ef he meets Big Frank there'll be music in ther air."

A bystander who had been in as much danger as anybody but who took things so coolly that he was open to a suspicion of having had a hand in the cannonading, made the remark as he gazed after the retreating figure:

"An' I think he's solid ter make cold meat. He's one er ther kinds ez only knows how ter argy a p'int at draw with his shooters. He's a lightnin' puller, he is; an' he won't shoot wild ag'in! I think I'll foller in ther distance an' see ther fun."

The disappearance of Kale Carter and Big Frank, together with some of the men who were known to train in the company of the latter, had its effect on the crowd; dissolving it a great deal quicker than Charley Cole's revolver and lantern could have done. Some were content to stay and recount the history of the rumpus to new arrivals, who looked into the room first, but immediately afterward reported at the bar.

"I guess, as the others have jumped the game, we may as well go too," remarked Hunter Browne. "We'll see what has become of Elderberry; I'll bet he made quarter-horse time, and he couldn't well miss the way to the Jefferson House."

"You're ther doctor," responded Blockey, "an' I'm ready ter take most any dose. It kinder tickles me about Tommy though. He can't play fur sour apples, but somehow he come outer this game 'way ahead."

"Don't worry yourself about Tommy. If he wants a job let him come my way. I can't get it out of my wool that he saved my bacon to-night; and the lad that does a good turn to old man Browne don't have to ask for interest when he gets it back."

The two were striding away from Hazard Hall, and were so engaged in conversation that they hardly heeded their steps as well as they might have done. Had any one attempted to follow them or been crouching near they might have noticed it, yet Hunter Browne walked straight ahead until he stumbled over a man that was lying in his way.

"Blazes! What's that?" ejaculated Pete Blockey, with a start.

Then seeing the dark form over which Browne had fallen, he stooped.

When he laid his hand on the heart of the prostrate person he found it was perfectly motionless. To all appearance the man had been dead for an hour.

CHAPTER XII.

A SERIOUS CHARGE.

"Dog blast my hide!"

At his discovery Blockey was unpleasantly surprised, though he was no mere novice in the matter of dead men.

And it was not altogether that the find proved to be a corpse.

"It's too cussed sing'lar fur anything," he continued to Hunter Browne, who had speedily recovered his equilibrium.

"What in high ole he-goats war he a-doin' 'round hyer? I tell yer, it jest knocks me stiff, so it does."

"What's the matter now? Who is he? Do you know him? It ain't the whip-man, from Walnut Bar, is it?"

"Blame yer whip-man! Ye'r crowdin' him down my throat till I'm jest sick on him. No, it ain't him. I wouldn't be so surprised ef it war. But it's that lawyer-looking cove that didn't have anything ter say fur hisself, an' come over in the hearse—Allbright are his name. What I want ter know are, what war he doin' round hyer?"

"And who killed him?" added Browne, stooping down to obtain a better view.

"No need ter ax that last, ef we've knowed ther fu'st. Ef we could tell whose road he war in, we'd know who killed him. But ketch on! It won't do ter let him lie hyer. He b'longs over at ther Jefferson, an' I guess we can stagger under him that fur. Ef George Washington lets his boarders wander 'round Bunco this time er night, he orter told 'em what they might expect."

With some repugnance Browne assisted to raise the body, and between them they carried it to the hotel, where they were received by We Wailo, the Chinese.

"What for you blingee dead man? Him no b'longey heah. Jefferson House loosee facee. Fu'st chop house. No co'pse wantee. Go 'way."

"But he does belong here," answered Browne, earnestly.

He was afraid that We Wailo would shut the door in their faces.

"This is Mr. Allbright, who, in company with the young lady, came in the same coach as yourself. We've just found him dead, and if he don't stay here over night, I don't see where we could get him in."

"Dat culis," answered the Chinaman, shaking his head, but no longer opposing their entrance.

"What fo' he do lunne lound? Make se no plopla—Melican kwei big as housee in Bunco, an' might know he catchee him fu'st pop. Wat fo' he no takee We Wailo, give he fai dolla'; then he maskee much galow when Wailo

an' he 'volver lound. Me talkee he, but him 'm-chung zung, no bittee use. Bling he in. Bettee lun fo' pill-man."

"It ain't no case fur a doctor," said Plumb Center Pete, shaking his head gravely; "an' I don't see ez a crowner ar' wanted very bad. Hyer's his last sickness. It 'ud be throwin' away time ter ask twelve men what he died ov. Whar's his room? Better kerry him thar, tuck him in, an' tell Jefferson ter 'range fur a funer'l in the mornin'."

"Allee lighty. We Wailo topside galow ebley time. This-a-way."

The Celestial took matters quite coolly after the first surprise was over, and led the way with cheerful alacrity, followed by the two men bearing their ghastly burden.

They had as much as possible avoided making a noise, and no one appeared to interrupt them in their progress. Without stopping to ask what view Jefferson would take of the matter, they laid the body of the unfortunate Allbright on the bed—which was so solid that it was not likely to cause any distortion.

"Quite comfortable he looks," said Pete, taking the light from the Chinaman and holding it down so that the face of the corpse was brought out in strong relief.

And just then Hunter Browne gave a start and a cry that caused Blockey to look up at him in surprise.

"I know him—I've seen him before!" exclaimed Browne, pointing excitedly at the face.

"Where did he come from? What was he doing here?"

"Can't prove it by me; but don't make sich eyes over it. I sw'ar, Browne, yer look ez though yer hed did it yerself."

"As he did, by his brain, if not by his hand. Hunter Browne, will lightnings never blast you? If this is another victim, I swear it shall be your last."

The two men turned in quick surprise, not unmixed with horror.

The voice was a woman's voice, and on the threshold, peering into the room, was Miss Vandeleur.

She had heard them as they approached the building and from her window was an unseen witness of their conference with We Wailo.

She had hastily thrown a wrapper over her night-dress, and as she stood there, her face pale from excitement, her large eyes gleaming, her uplifted hand quivering, she seemed quite a different being from the inquisitive, but free and easy mannered girl with whom Blockey had traveled.

Hunter Browne seemed to note the difference, too.

He passed his hand over his eyes and stared at her as though he had suddenly seen a ghost.

Evidently there was more in this affair than appeared on the surface; but Plumb Center Pete was not the man to hesitate when he saw his companion at fault.

"Excuse me, miss, but that's rather a rough charge you're making, and I guess you're jest a leetle bit wild. Browne are a solid man at Bunco, an' you can't hurt him; but ef you war ter talk 'round loose that way 'bout some men, it might be enuf ter gi'n 'em ther last sickness. It don't sometimes take much ter start a mob; but you've no idear what a nasty thing they be ter handle when they git ter goin'. Sing a leetle small, Miss Millie, ef yer don't want ter do more damage than them purty eyes o' yours would keer ter look at."

She listened, though her gaze was glued upon the form on the bed. As he ceased speaking, she drew herself up to her full height:

"Perhaps you are partly right; but for all that, I have spoken but the truth. That man expected to have trouble with Hunter Browne, and it looks as though he had had it hot and deadly. To every one else in Bunco, he was a stranger; no living soul else had any interest in his removal. Examine his pockets and see if he has not left a statement to that effect—and see, too, if he has been robbed. Only one that killed him for vengeance would leave his valuables untouched. I heard shots in the distance—probably it was one of those that brought him down."

"But, glory Moses, miss, do yer see what yer pilin' on me? Hunt Browne an' I be in ther same boat. Ef he cleaned out ther old rooster, I must 'a' had a hand in."

Plumb Center Pete seemed dazed by the unexpected charge, the full bearings of which he understood better than did Miss Vandeleur herself.

"No. You are his victim, too," she answered obstinately.

"Perhaps, when the deed had been done, he found you, brought you to the spot, and beguiled you into a seeming implication."

"Wait er minnit. Me an' Browne, hev'in' picked up Goggle George—which ther same are ther chap called Elderberry—went off on er quiet leetle racket ter-night, an' when I got on it, I stayed thar. I ain't hed my eyes offen him sence supper, 'cept when I left 'em playin' seven-up, an' went inter ther next room ter saturate. Him an' me left Hazard Hall together; we war

together when we picked up ther corpus, an' we're together now. You kin make ther best ov it, an' ther wu'st ov it; but 'pears ter me, ef I war you, I'd retire an' think over this till mornin'. Ther Chinese 'll look 'round an' keep off ther rats, an' I'll see he's decently planted. More ner that no man c'u'd promise."

"Talk is cheap, but I'm enough of a Western woman to know that it takes money to buy land. You are two men; I am one woman. I ask you to search his pockets and give into my hands the damning proof that I aver you will find there."

Browne stood now with his arms folded. His coolness had come back to him, but he was taking no part in the conversation. His interest, one would have said, was more in the girl herself than in what she was saying.

By neither word nor gesture did he caution Blockey what to say.

"It's no nice job yer puttin' on me, miss. I've seen meat fur breakfast on ther bill ov fare offen enough, but I don't fancy feelin' in er dead man's pockets. But ter oblige yer I will. I guess ef there's any vallybles you're 'bout ther right one ter hold 'em. Yer seem ter hev his p'int down fine enough ter be a side pard ov his'n, anyway. Hyer goes; you watch me, so you kin sw'ar it war on ther squar'."

Very deliberately he took out the stub of a pencil and an old memorandum-book, that still had in it a few blank leaves. Then he began his unpleasant search, jotting down the name of each article as he removed it from the body.

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, at length; "you have it at last. Read that! He told me it was written."

In her excitement she stepped fully within the room, and with only a momentary hesitation moved between Blockey and Hunter Browne.

Plumb Center Pete unfolded the paper—a half sheet of legal cap—and looked at its contents with a curious eye.

The writing was a clear, round hand, and he had no trouble in deciphering it, little as he was accustomed to reading manuscript.

"To Whom it May Concern:—

"I do solemnly declare that it is my belief that Hunter Browne is a fugitive from justice—an untried murderer. Should anything happen to me, it will be at his hands, and I charge whoever finds this to see that justice is done. Among my effects, a more detailed account of the case will be found."

"SILAS ALLBRIGHT."

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESPERATE INTRUDER.

FOR a moment after reading these few lines, which he did to himself, Plumb Center Pete stood fairly nonplused.

Then he turned to his companion.

"Thar's suthin' in what ther gal sez, though not ez much ez she thinks. This speaks about a bill ov perticklers 'round hyer somewhar. Ez I've knowed of yer, end on end, fur nigh ter twenty year, I don't think it's much account; but ther gal orter hev a squar' shake. What do yer say, Browne? Be yer goin' ter give her a clean swing, er be yer goin' ter cut up rough? I'm yer friend, Browne, an' I don't ax yer ter help yer git inter a scrape, but ther gal hez started ther ball, an' ther best plan are ter let it roll."

"And roll it shall, while my life is spared!" exclaimed the girl, excitedly; but Blockey only looked inquiringly at the miner.

"Have it as you will, Pete," answered Hunter Browne, coldly, his arms still folded, his eyes still fixed upon the girl.

"Perhaps I ought to get on my dignity, and all that; but it's really better for her to make herself sure, if she can, that there is some foundation for this string of nonsense some one has been stuffing her with. Look around, and whatever you find turn over to her; but you'd better have Jefferson up here before you begin. They don't administer on goods and chattels of a deceased in quite so primitive a manner as they did when I first struck this camp."

There was a peculiar gloominess about Browne's tones that made Plumb Center Pete pause and gaze inquiringly at him; but before he made answer the Celestial was heard from.

"We Wailo tinkee lobber man before tim be heah, cleaney ebley thing up—no hab find monley, paplee, anyting. Window spoilum ebley t'ing muchee dolla wylo ch'boy."

"By thunder, Browne, ther beathen's 'bout right. It looks as though the robbers had been here, and taken everything of any value. We ought to have noticed that window ourselves."

The Chinaman's discovery put a new face on the aspect of affairs, and even the cool-headed Blockey did not care to linger there longer unless the proprietor of the house was brought in to take notice of how things looked. This time We Wailo was dispatched in earnest, and soon the coatless Jefferson arrived, rubbing his eyes and cursing at large.

When he understood more fully what had happened it was hard to say whether wrath or consternation predominated.

"I've been hyar twenty year," he howled,

"an' nothin' like this ever happened in my house afore. I'll give a hundred dollars to find out who bu'sted that window; an' throw in a rope ter hang ther infernal cuss. This hyar's a goin' ter be an' all-fired expense, an' blast 'em, they ain't left ernuf ter pay fur ther w'ar an' t'ar ov a coolin' board, let er lone a coffin. This hyar burg hes jest got ter pass round ther hat an' put up ernuf ter jestify ther berryin' er you'll h'ar suthin' drap. This hyar's too much."

Disgust at the mercenary nature of Jefferson's lamentations drove Miss Millie away a good deal sooner than all the common-sense that Pete Blockey could have uttered. She watched in silence the search that was made, and when it was certain that the intruder had made a clean sweep she flitted from the room.

In the hall she met three men just stealing in. Pereira led the way, looking neither to the right nor the left, and Tom Bowers, followed, keeping a tight hold on the elbow of no less a person than Professor Elderberry.

The latter looked the worse for wear, and evidently had intrusted himself, body and soul, to his companion, who was in decidedly good conceit of himself, though they had been dodging around town, keeping out of the way of the bad men who had crowded them so at Hazard Hall. It was only a chance that brought them together, but a happy one, since Professor Elderberry expressed his delight, while Tenderfoot Tom had made up his mind that this was a good opportunity to transfer his head-quarters to the Jefferson House.

The meeting with Pereira was just as cordial on the part of the two men as it could well be. They had come across him standing on a corner as though at a loss which way to turn, and had brought him straight along with them, as being able to show them the way in at that hour of the night.

After the rough handling the Mexican capitalist had received on account of Miss Millie, it was not very likely that he would care to meet her—and she did not give him a second glance—but she looked sharply at Tom Bowers, and made a little motion of her hand, as if to indicate that she had something to communicate.

If he saw the gesture he gave no sign, and as the hall was but dimly lighted it was likely that it escaped him. He went on with Elderberry, and turned into his room. If it seems strange that Tom Bowers would place his head within reach of the lion's mouth, it may be as well to add that he had not the slightest suspicion that Kale Carter had his head-quarters at the Jefferson House.

Something like a curl of disgust distorted Miss Millie's usually finely chiseled lips, but she made no other effort to attract the attention of the Flat from Walnut Bar. If the three men had not enough curiosity to take a second glance at a handsome woman wandering around the hotel at that time of night, she did not intend to trouble them, especially when she had enough already to occupy her mind.

She had entered her room, and closed the door behind her before she noted that the light she had left burning dimly had been totally extinguished.

Vexed at this, which she thought her own fault, Miss Vandeleur was temporarily thrown off her guard; yet at best it would have required sharp ears to have detected the presence of any other living being there until the instant that a gripe settled upon her throat, closing with a nervous energy that seemed to indicate that the one who gave it meant to slay.

Not even an attempt at a cry passed Millie's lips; but quick as a flash her hands went up in an answering grasp, and her fingers closed in on her assailant.

Then she uttered what was even from her handsome lips a grim laugh. Her one hand caught a round, shapely wrist, the other closed upon a slender throat with such vehemence as to break the gripe upon her own.

She did not hesitate either, but gave a vicious spring that forced her antagonist back.

Once started, Miss Vandeleur never halted until the window was reached. There she forced the unknown downward, until the pale light streamed in on the prowler.

"Ah, as I thought," said Miss Millie coolly, and in a discreet whisper.

"Lucky for you that I recognized the touch of a woman's hand. I am here with my life in my hand, and I am ready to do as the people of Bunco do. I can pull a trigger as well as the best of them, if need be. But who are you?"

It was indeed a woman who had made the unlooked-for assault—and that she was in deadly earnest the knife held in the uplifted hand gave grim evidence. Surely it was something more than a mere lucky chance that enabled Millie Vandeleur to clutch that wrist before the blade fell.

Without knowing it her grasp tightened, and suddenly the knife dropped to the floor with a ringing jingle, while the woman herself doubled up in a swoon that was too complete to be a fraud.

"In the name of wonder what is all this?" said Miss Vandeleur, as she stepped hastily back and lit her extinguished lamp.

The cold lips gave no answer, and Miss Millie proceeded to raise the prostrate woman and throw her on her own bed. She was not as tender about it as she might have been under other circumstances; but after what had happened small blame to her for that.

Then, by the light of the lamp, she narrowly scanned the face before her.

It was that of a perfect stranger.

"Who can she be? Certainly I never saw her before. Is she an ordinary thief; or is there something beyond what I can see on the surface. It may be as well to have her beyond the power of doing harm when she recovers her senses."

The idea was too good a one to neglect, and her fingers deftly knotted strips of cloth around wrists and ankles.

After that the study of the face was resumed.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO WOMEN AT WAR.

THE person, whoever she was, seemed to be little more than a girl as to figure, and Miss Vandeleur, who was a shrewd guesser, fancied that she was about her own age, or a little older.

It was a wonderfully handsome face that she read by the lamplight—in almost everything the opposite of her own.

It was dark, in spite of the present pallor of coma, and there was a great mass of jet-black, crispy, curling hair, that was clipped short as though it belonged to a boy, though there could be no mistaking the delicate contour of the features.

Miss Millie was more puzzled than ever.

A happy thought struck her.

"Surely I never saw that face before; but it looks to me like a face with a purpose. Suppose I examine her pockets. It will be hard indeed if there is nothing there to give me a clew to her identity."

But no clew was there on her person.

While engaged in the search, the closed lids opened, and the first thing Miss Millie knew a pair of midnight eyes were watching her with very much the expression of a hopelessly-trapped wild beast.

"Ah, you are coming to your senses, are you?" asked Miss Vandeleur, as coolly as if this was a room-mate, recovering from a slight indisposition.

"You didn't think I was so well able to take care of myself, did you? I'm sorry for you, my little friend, though, as you probably came in here to kill me, my regrets are, of course, thrown away."

No answer; and, between the reddening lips, the speaker could see a set of perfect, gleaming teeth.

"I am sure I would like very well to know what you crawled through that window for."

"To kill you," came the answer, in a savage, but well guarded, whisper.

"Ah! Then you are either an idiot or a mad-woman. Of course you see by this time that I do not intend to be killed, though I confess I don't understand exactly what to do with you."

"Kill me," responded the girl, still in the same low tone.

"If not now then one day or another it will be your life or mine, I give you fair warning, so why should you hesitate. There is my knife over yonder where it fell. Take it and thrust it into my heart. It is your only chance."

Was the girl mad?

Surely, if her words went for anything, she was; yet Miss Vandeleur thought, in all the sullen recklessness, she could see traces of the hidden meaning for which she looked.

"Really, my dear, you are too foolish for anything. Why should you want to kill me—if you can—and why should you think I would allow such an undoubted madwoman to perambulate this region?"

"Why did you come here then, thief that you are? I have been watching for you for a week, and when, this night, I knew you had come I struck at once."

"You didn't strike, my dear. There is where you made your mistake. You wanted to tell me you were going to do it. That's a woman all over. And you answer my question by asking another. That's woman-like again. Now, if you are going in for man's weapons, drop the woman's. Give it to me square and solid. I don't know how I can do any harm to you unless you throw yourself in my road; and unless you are afraid for some of your friends—and, by the way, I am almost certain that I never saw any of them—it is almost a sure thing that you came in here to steal. Are you here on your own account, or did you come for some one else? It makes a good deal of difference both to you and to me which it is."

"I have told you once," answered the girl, in a passionately low tone. "Now, after that last insult, I refuse to speak again. Kill me if you choose; give an alarm and bring all Bunco here if you will, I will not say more. But beware what you do. One way or another you are certain to die; but if it makes any difference to

you how, you will handle me carefully. I have friends."

"No doubt. But see here, little one, was it one of your friends—or a dozen of them—that killed Mr. Albright, and robbed his room of whatever valuables he had with him?"

"What do you mean?" answered the girl with a perceptible start.

"I know nothing of any man by the name of Albright."

"Perhaps not. He may have had half a dozen names in his time, and one of the others may have been more popular. One thing is certain. Within the last hour or so some one killed him on the street, and rifled his room. The landlord and some of his guests are examining the matter now. I was just over looking at the corpse or I would have probably shot you as you came in. I tell you, my hands can protect my head against fair odds every time. He came here with me. It is natural to suppose that if we are both attacked on the same night it is by the same party. Yes. That is the only conclusion. You wanted to rob and murder me as you have robbed and murdered Silas Albright."

"It is false!" uttered the other. "You know it is false. My business is with you alone. I would die before I took aught of yours save your life. I know nothing of the man, or what has happened to him."

"So you say, but who will believe you? Come. An open confession is good for the soul. I don't want to see harm come to one of my sex if she is truly repentant. Who were your accomplices, and what did they murder him for? If it was not simply for his money then tell me what was Albright's errand here. Unburden your conscience by full confession and I swear you shall go free. Make haste, though. You can hear that the house is aroused. If anything should prompt them to make a search and you were found here I could no longer save you."

"You are mocking me now," answered the girl, a glint of anger replacing the fire of hate in her eyes. "You talk, perhaps, of some man who never lived. You think you can wring out of me all you want to know when I tell you to show you how far wide you are of the mark. I am not a fool. What story I will tell to the others you will only know when they come. Now I am done. From me you do not get another word."

Her lips closed tightly and there was an obstinate look in her eyes that showed how much she was in earnest.

Miss Vandeleur had a white elephant on her hands and no mistake.

She was fairly puzzled what to do with it.

The idea of charging the girl with complicity in the Albright affair was repugnant to her, and, besides, there was an uncertainty as to the style of justice meted out in Bunco. It might be sudden and riotous, or it might be of the kind that views the prosecutor with the most suspicion. She had not even succeeded in obtaining the name of her prisoner, or found out whether or no she was a recognized citizen of the town.

"If I let you go will you swear to me not to come back?" she asked at length, after some moments of silent consideration.

No answer.

"I may be foolish, but you seem so much in earnest that I do not care to harm you. At the same time it would never do to have to hire a guard every time I wanted to snatch a few hours of sleep. I have an idea that I can trust to your word, and am willing to try it. Will you promise? Mind you, I say nothing of what may be done elsewhere. I only ask that you or any one sent by you will not try again to enter here;—out of this I will take care of myself as best I can."

She spoke earnestly and at last her words seemed to have some effect. In spite of herself, the captive spoke.

"There must be something good about you, and surely you are very brave. Yes. I will promise that much. Let me go and I vow you will not see me here again. There will be war; but it will be when you come out of your den. Now, keep your word."

Without speaking Miss Vandeleur removed the bandages from her wrists and ankles. If she kept a watchful eye on the girl as she did so, it was without any sign of fear.

There was no need to doubt.

The moment that she was free the girl bounded from the bed lightly to her feet.

For an instant she stood in a listening attitude.

There had been hurried steps and the sound of voices in the hall, but at this moment all without was quiet.

A smile of satisfaction curled the full lips. Without further hesitation the would-be assassin, instead of retreating through the window, coolly threw open the door and looking once backward with a singular glance, walked away without caution or hesitation.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PROFESSOR TAKES POSSESSION.

THE little affair at the Jefferson House hardly created a ripple of excitement outside of its immediate inmates.

Other men had been found dead on the street before the luckless Albright, and as he was so totally a stranger to the people of the burg they very naturally were willing to wait for his friends to come and hunt the matter up.

Of course no one of any consequence thought for a moment of identifying Hunter Browne with the affair, and those few who had heard Miss Millie's charges the night before very prudently kept the matter to themselves, since the young lady did not refer to it the next morning.

Neither did she refer to the singular adventure with the unknown assailant, though she kept her eyes open on the chance of seeing that interesting young lady by daylight.

Professor Elderberry crawled out, looking the worse for wear, and after a moderate breakfast hunted up Mr. Browne, to report for duty.

Hunter Browne had been quietly making all necessary preparations for the funeral, in pursuance with an arrangement entered into with George Washington Jefferson.

That duty having been performed, he was ready for business just about the time that Elderberry seriously began to search for him.

The professor bustled up with outstretched hand.

"I was afraid, aw, Mister Browne, that something, aw, had happened to you, I should have seen you again last night—aw—but I left that den of wickedness in such haste, aw, that I did not have time to make an appointment, aw."

Browne smiled.

"Your head was undoubtedly level, and I began to entertain a high respect for you just about the time I saw you polka out of the window. It's not every tenderfoot that would have had sense enough to catch on when he saw Pereira show a lead. How did you get in? All right of course, or you wouldn't be here this morning. I had intended to look you up last night and see, but I had some rather unpleasant adventures after we separated, that drove you entirely out of my mind."

"Don't remember it, aw. I met a late fellow-passenger, who was very kind, and then we two fell in with Mister Pereira, who, aw, led us to this place. I do not know, aw, what we should have done without him, though, aw, he was a man of very few words. The other man—a Mister Bowers, last from Walnut Bar—was the gentleman who took his seat at our table when Blockey left us. After we got here I took him to my room, aw, because he seemed undecided what to do; and we had a long talk. He seemed quite adrift, aw, as to the future, having been disappointed in meeting a Colonel Johnson, whom he expected to find here. As, aw, he had a limited stock of money, he would accept almost any position, aw, that would pay his expenses, and I promised him that I would represent the matter to you in its proper light."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said Hunter Browne, with a short laugh. "That's equal to getting the cart before the horse. He must jerk solid lightning when he talks confidentially, and have the cheek of a brass monkey. It's not so sure that I can do anything for you, let alone your friend. If you can't do anything with the refractory ore that's in sight—and there's millions of it—I won't want you, the Flat from Walnut Bar, or anybody else. I'll close up the Bunker Hill shaft quicker than you can say Jack Robinson."

"Don't be excited, Mister Browne," drawled the professor, not at all excited himself. "You have no idea what I can do for you, aw, with time and tools. It's not like a new thing, aw. You know the gold is there, and I know, aw, that I can get it out."

"That's so. I've been here a score of years, and between you and me, I have known the spot where we have sunk the Bunker Hill shaft for pretty nearly the whole of that time. And I knew just as well that I could do nothing with it. Now, it's die dog or eat the hatchet. I am willing to pay for having you try your hand at it, and if you succeed you can just about name your own price."

"Aw, you will find me as good as my representations. It may take a few days, aw; it may take a few weeks, aw. Sooner or later you will find me there. The first thing, aw, is to inspect. I can soon tell you, aw, whether you will have a place for Thomas Bowers."

"Very true, very true. Come with me. I am on my way to the spot, and it will be better for us to find out by inspection than to take a month. Get your Flat from Walnut Bar, if you want him, and we'll take a look at things. You'll find I've got a start with ore that will work."

Professor Elderberry, no doubt, believed this, for he indicated that he was ready at once, and that Bowers was waiting to see what would be the result of the interview.

"Bring him along, then," said Brown. "And you might intimate that it's not healthy to be too curious when he first drops among strangers. My men don't believe in people that ask too many questions."

The professor answered promptly that he would vouch for this young man, and went off to inform him of the chances. Then the three went out to look after the ore that was being mined in the Bunker Hill shaft.

Once there Professor Elderberry took hold like a man that understood his business, and finally stated decisively, that Hunter Browne—having machinery and capital—had the best thing that was known in that section of the territory. He thought that in a few days he would have things running to the satisfaction of every one.

Having heard this report with a smile that indicated that he took it for what it was worth Hunter Browne departed, leaving the professor to make any further researches he wished, and to get better acquainted with his surroundings. As for himself he had various matters on his hands, including the disposition of Mr. Albright's corpse, and other effects.

At the shaft considerable progress had already been made, and Elderberry found things so well to his hand that it was not hard to guess that he was brought in to try for success when others had failed. He had his coat off and began really to look like work when Tenderfoot Tom came hurrying in.

"See hyar, gosha'mighty, there's trouble in ther air an' you'd better skip afore ther cyclone bu'sts loose. Looks like Browne hed put up a job ter see what sand yer kerry; an' it's a dog-blasted mean one, too, so it are."

"What, aw, is the matter with you? Mr. Browne said he would have a place, aw, for you if I made a success out of this, and I'm going to do it. If you want to go back to Bunco, aw, go. I can find my way back alone."

"You don't ketch on. The trouble ain't at Bunco, by a long slap; but right hyer. Ther men are goin' ter feel ov yer right now, an' see who's goin' ter be boss. Some on 'em wanted Plumb Center Pete fur boss, an' ther rest didn't want you; so, ez Browne ain't hyer, they're goin' ter get up ther ripest size ov a row. I heered 'em, an' ef ye'll take advice I say, scoot."

The professor stuttered and stammered for a moment.

"Aw, aw—I don't—the—the men, aw, can't be crazy. If the shaft shuts up they must stop work. I'm their—their friend, don't you see—aw?"

"I kin—but, dog-blast 'em, they can't. They're jest on it bigger ner a wolf, an' it's too late ter talk. They're hyer now."

Tenderfoot Tom's announcement was only too true. Every last man in the employ of Hunter Browne had dropped his tools, and gathering as if by some preconcerted plan they came in to Professor Elderberry's presence with a rush.

It was pretty certain that they did not come in a friendly mood, either, though there was a good deal of coarse laughter as they elbowed each other, each one trying to get a near position to the brawny-looking fellow who led the gang, and who was now, as on other occasions, their spokesman.

Coolness came back to the professor with surprising suddenness. He had already drawn on his coat, and as the crowd halted within a few yards, the only sign of nervousness that he gave, was the short, quick way in which he adjusted his spectacles. Then, from under his glasses he peered at them benignantly, giving first a little half-nod at Buck Beans, the burly leader before mentioned.

As for Tenderfoot Tom—in default of a convenient table under which to crawl, he had subsided into a corner behind the professor, and certainly did not intend to attract more attention than was absolutely necessary.

The unwavering attitude of the new superintendent had some effect.

If he was too innocent to be frightened, there was little likelihood of his offering any serious resistance. With all hands sober, instant murder was not at all what they were after; and there were men there who would have taken his part sooner than have seen him set upon before receiving any warning.

So Buck Beans, not at all uneasy under the steady gaze, after waiting a reasonable length of time for a question, was forced to open the ball himself.

"See hyar, mister. We come in ther fu't place ter ax a question er two, an' then, mebbe, ter lay down ther law. Be you, er ben't you ther superintendent ez old man Browne hez brung in ter show us no-account gerloots how ter run ther Bunker Hill?"

Professor Elderberry adjusted his spectacles once more before answering, and then folded his arms behind his back.

"Aw, I am the gentleman that has been, aw, in correspondence with Mr. Browne; and, aw, I had the conditional offer of the, aw, superintendency of the mine he purposes developing here. It will take a scientific man to do anything here, and, aw, I believe that I have the ability. When I have, aw, convinced Mr. Browne, I understand that I will be placed permanently in charge, aw."

The length of the professor's answer was sufficient to bring out prominently the peculiarity in his speech, which was more noticeable here than under other surroundings. When he ceased, there was a roar of laughter.

"Waugh!" exclaimed Beans sharply.

"What yer take us fur? Yer think us boys want any sich skientifick cuss fur a boss when

ther's a hull man like Plumb Center Pete layin' 'round loose?"

"But, aw, gentlemen, allow me to reason with you a little. Mr. Blockey is an extraordinary man, no doubt, but he can't do anything here. I can, aw. Mr. Browne won't want your services unless they bring him in some value, and so, really, aw, I'm your best friend. Give me a week, aw, and I will convince the worst of you."

The professor tried to be impressive; but to the men of Bunker Hill shaft he was only ludicrous. A howl of derision was the immediate answer. Then Beans struck in:

"You think er man with er b'iled shirt an' goggles kin larn us anything? Waigh! Next thing you'll stick on a plug hat an' a yard er frills. We don't want yer byar, an' I'm er committee erpointed ter say, git."

"That's so. We can't stand no sich, byer."

"Better lay yer tracks with ther heels this way!"

"Slug him!"

"Run him out."

"No b'iled shirt an' goggles byer. He ain't said drink once."

Half a dozen voices joined in a medley of a chorus, and it was evident that the crowd was becoming more and more in earnest.

"Gentlemen, aw, I heard some one say something about drink, aw," interposed the professor, hastily.

"Perhaps it was an oversight, my not mentioning it sooner, but, aw, I am not yet thoroughly accustomed to your ways. As a newcomer, aw, I shall be happy to invite you all to drink at my expense, aw—to-night. A barrel, aw, if necessary."

"Roll out yer barrel, then, and right now. Hooray! Let's take him right down ter Bunco."

The mention of a barrel of whisky was a master-stroke of policy, if it was unintentional.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I couldn't go now. Your time, aw, belongs to Mr. Browne, and he might, aw, be justly angry. To-night, though, aw, my time will be at my own disposal. Go back to your work now, and meet me, aw, at the Jefferson House, aw, at half past seven."

"You'd play us fur flats, would yer? Cuss you, you'll go now, er we'll jump yer quicker'n lightning!"

"And I say, aw, gentlemen, I, aw, won't go."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE ASSERTS ITSELF.

GOGGLE GEORGE, as Plumb Center Pete had nicknamed the professor, spoke with an increasing coolness, and as he spoke he deliberately turned his back upon the assemblage and with his nose in the air and his arms crossed behind him under his coat-tails, took a step or two away, though with hardly the haste of a retreat.

The idea of one man defying the crowd—and there had been at least a score facing him—was so extravagant that it took the breath away of some, and perhaps saved him from a general attack. Of all, Buck Beans was the only man that sprung forward.

His hand dropped heavily on the shoulder of the newly-fledged superintendent, while he shouted hoarsely:

"Blast yer white-livered karkiss, we're shoutin', an' e' yer know what's good fur ye ye'll sing small. Come out of that!"

Beans gave a powerful jerk, one that would have almost brought a cinnamon bear out of a small hole. It brought the professor.

Only, it brought him so much more easily than Beans had expected that he was entirely unprepared. If anything Elderberry helped in the movement, and landed against him with unforeseen violence, just as Tom Bowers, in attempting to crawl out of his corner, was immediately at his heels.

Over the Flat from Walnut Bar went Buck Beans head down and heels up, striking with a thwack that was enough to make a man's heart sick. Up jumped Tom Bowers with a yell, and off he went with a tolerably correct idea, that his life depended on the rapidity with which he could vanish. Professor Elderberry recovered his equilibrium, again adjusted his spectacles, and now faced the crowd alone.

As usual Bowers was in luck. He evaded the grasp of two or three hands, thrust out to detain him, and shot down the hillside with the speed of a lightning express train, and there was but a semblance of pursuit.

Buck Beans was not exactly knocked senseless by the concussion; but he was so far dazed that he only raised to a sitting position, when he sat speechless for a minute or two until he could take in the fact that his fellow-workmen were actually laughing at him.

Then he sprung to his feet, his face livid with rage, and glared around him.

"Knocked out ther fu't round; bully fur old Goggles!" exclaimed a laughing voice. "Say, Buck, hedn't yer better haul in yer horns? He ain't much ter look at, but he seems ter be a holy terror on ther war path!"

Just then occurred one of those sudden revul-

sions that will sometimes happen. Buck Beans was fairly exploding with wrath; but it was all directed at the last speaker.

"You think ye're a slugger, Mike Madden. Blamed ef yer sha'n't try him yerself. Dog-gone him, ef he do w'ar a b'iled shirt an' a black coat, he's full ov sand clean up to ther mazzard, an' I'll bet yer can't make him holler, ef yer kills him. I ain't used ter crippin' babies. That's yer line—wade in."

"Curse you, Buck Beans, do yer mean ter say I'm not ez good a man ez you be any day? I'll mash him fu't, an' then I'll bu'st yer jaw. Stand outen ther way, an' let me at him."

The laughter was all gone out of Mike Madden's voice. There had been a rivalry between him and Beans that had not as yet led to blows, but Madden was by no means averse to settling in that way who was henceforth to be the leading spirit of the gang, though the turning over to him of the new superintendent would be the first point in his favor.

"All right, I'll attend ter you afterward. Fire away at him; but give ther little man a chance. A man ez cool ez he be kin generally handle hisself; ez maybe you'll find out. Fair play, an' no gougins. Sail in ef yer dar."

"A minute gentlemen, aw, if you please, I have not the physical strength, aw, of my proposed antagonist; but it is possible that, aw, I may have science, that will be compensatory. I have paid some little attention, aw, to the subject of self-defense. If, aw, I castigate this champion, will, aw, this matter stand adjourned until we meet as friends, aw, at the Jefferson House? Some such guarantee as that I certainly should have, aw."

"You bet," responded Buck Beans. "I'm runnin' this gang, an' ef you kin git to ther Jefferson House an' be 'round fur ther frolic ter-night, we'll kerry yer on our hands, we will. Shuck yerself now, an' hand me yer specs. If Mike drives 'em in yer peepers, yer won't hev much use fur 'em, er anything else."

"Thanks, aw, but I prefer to keep my property, aw, where it will do the most good. If Mr. Madden will advance, I will do my humble best. I cannot have much influence, aw, with you men unless I can meet you on the same ground."

Mike Madden uttered a contemptuous growl as he pushed up his sleeves and sprung forward.

"No hitting a man when he's down, aw," said the professor, speaking a little more rapidly than usual.

"Nary bit," answered Buck Beans, stepping to one side and motioning the crowd back, even while Madden lunged forward with a powerful, though reckless blow, that was heavy enough to fell an ox.

Professor Elderberry immediately assumed a sitting posture, and very coolly thrust his spectacles in the breast-pocket of his coat. Whether he had been scientific enough to drop just in time, or whether he had chanced to miss the full force of the blow, were subjects for discussion.

The patent fact was that he had not been seriously harmed.

Madden would no doubt have thrown himself upon the man, but was checked by a warning growl from the crowd, who had begun to take a sudden interest in the stranger.

"He sha'n't come ther drop game too much, Mike," said the self-appointed referee; "but, unless ther's willful foul, I tell yer it's goin' ter be fa'r an' squar' stan'up work. Time!"

Professor Elderberry's arms were held pretty much straight up and down, and he danced over the ground with an agility the heavier man was incapable of.

Again Madden led off with what was intended to be a stunner; but this time the professor parried neatly, and sent in a one-two-three, given so quickly the blows could hardly be seen.

They were all sharp, chopping hits, that cut wonderfully, though they had no stunning effect. When he danced back, blood was visible on Madden's face, though he was sniffling hard to prevent its dropping from his bugle.

"Fu't blood fur ther superintendent! Didn't I say he carried gravel?"

Madden ground his teeth as he heard the exclamation of his rival, and dashed in for close fighting. Such blows as he had received would not whip him in a week. He would cheerfully take a dozen of them to get a gripe on Goggle George.

But Goggle George was not to be had. To the left or right he shifted as the case required, dodging, parrying and striking, flinging in his blows left or right as was most convenient, at times beating a regular tattoo.

"Ah-yah! I've got yer now!" howled Madden at last, as he flung his left arm around his nimble persecutor, and drew back his right to strike. He only asked for one crushing blow, and it looked as though here was his chance to get it.

"Not yet, ah!" drawled the professor.

With wonderful skill and promptness he slipped his right arm around Madden, catching that worthy's right arm just below the elbow.

Then three times he struck full on the mark with his left.

They were only half-arm hits and round at that, but they captured Mike Madden's wind, and as he doubled up from the hot ones in his bread basket Elderberry let go, and threw his whole weight into one, lightning-like blow, that went straight for the butt of the ear.

The professor had the chances in his favor—but the chances were just where he had put them. The blows on the mark, coming in so hotly and unexpectedly had set Madden all abroad, and the right-hander was the *coup de grace*.

"Didn't I told him so?" shouted Beans.

This was a different thing from his own overthrow, and Mike Madden had been whipped on his own merits.

More than that the professor had, for the time at least, gained a victory over the rest. Buck Beans after so far espousing his cause could not well go back on him, nor did he seem to want to, while the men followed up the cue they had taken from him so nearly unanimously that Madden's friends, seeing they were in the minority had nothing to say. Some of them dragged off their champion, who looked as though he had had a close call to a broken neck, and if they growled, it was not likely that they would try to bite.

"Put her thar, Goggles," continued Beans, holding out his hand.

"If yer kin do ez well handlin' refractory ores ez yer kin handlin' yer fives this hvar gang are willin' ter give yer a trial. A feller kin sometimes be a man ef he does wear a b'iled shirt."

"That's so, Buck, that's so. He's a sacred ole slugger frum Slaughter Town, ain't he? I talked the matter over with Hunt Browne las' night, an' I guess he's ther man yer want. I've struck a job anyhow, so yer don't want ter raze him up on my account."

Just as the professor and Buck Beans clasped hands Plumb Center Pete stepped forward. Unseen he had been a witness of the pugilistic contest. Beans looked over his way.

"Ye'r bloody right; but it ain't every day a man gits fair play like we give him. Ef they'd 'a' begun ter shoot whar would he 'a' bin? It's a reek ter hev sich a man fur a figgerhead, fur whar's his good ef outsiders begin ter crowd us an' he don't know a navy six from a hand-saw?"

"But, aw, I can learn," said Elderberry so earnestly that there was a roar.

With that laugh his position was established, and though there was some good-natured chaff for a while, the threatened emeute was over and the men soon went back to work.

"Aw, I think it would be well if some one informed Mr. Browne that everything had been arranged here. If that, aw, fugitive gives his version, he may, aw, be brought out here for nothing."

The professor spoke in a low tone to Plumb Center Pete; but that worthy only laughed.

"Don't yer worry 'bout Hunt Browne, an' he won't worry 'bout you. He ain't hirin' men ez can't take keer ov theselves, an' ef you can't he wants to know it. Ef I see him I'll let him know. Pitch in byer, an' keep things movin'. Look out fur Madden, an' keep on ther right side ov Beans. So long."

Blockey took his departure, and on the following Saturday the pay-rolls would not have shown any loss of time for the day on which Professor Elderberry arrived, had nothing else occurred.

CHAPTER XVII.

TENDERFOOT TOM ANTICIPATES TROUBLE.

TENDERFOOT TOM could hardly help having a glimmering idea that he had not appeared to the best advantage in the little affair at the Bunker Hill Mine. He had warned the professor of what was coming, crawled into a corner when the trouble began, and at the first opportunity ran away.

He did not run all the way to Bunco; but when once assured that pursuit had been given over, he halted and listened.

Not hearing anything for some time, he began to creep hesitatingly back. He did not intend to venture into danger, but he did want to find out the result of the affair before he spread the intelligence of the actual death of the new superintendent.

He had sharp ears; for after some time had been wasted in tacking about he heard the voices of two persons in conversation, who were approaching him from the direction in which his interest was centered.

Having no desire to be seen, Bowers darted into the bushes and threw himself down upon the ground.

Of course he listened.

The speaker was Plumb Center Pete; the other, whom he did not fairly see, was a person that Bowers did not recognize, though his voice seemed to be somewhat familiar. The two were evidently talking about what had just occurred.

"He's a bad little man from Bitter Crick," said Blockey, in continuation, "an' ther way he

handled hisself war jest a caution. It'll take a good man ter dump him out ef he once gits hold. I dunno when I war more fooled on a man than I war on him. Oh, it war jest too lively fur any use, an' Madden got fun by ther cord. An' him a-lookin' ez innercent ez a muel. Next thing he'll be a shootin'."

"But what became of the other man—the greenhorn, you know?"

"Tenderfoot Tom? Oh, he skipped, a good deal more scared than hurt. He jest knows when's ther time ter git. Fur a real, up-an-down ijeot, he hez more sense an' kims out nigher ther top than I've ginnerally seen 'em."

"Idiot be hanged! They don't make them much smarter. He's not down here nosing around, fer nothing; and if some one don't drop him in his tracks something will break. I've got my eye on him, and I tell you if he tries any of his games my way I'll pull and cut loose. It will take a man to down him; but if he spreads too freely the man will be found."

"Hello!" ejaculated Blockey. "He's been stompin' on your toes, bez he? Browne thinks he's a bite; an' some others thinks he's a durned fool. What's your 'pinion?"

"I think he's as near ready for sudden death as men generally get before they go off the hooks. That's enough. If he ran away he ran to grind an ax—when he comes again somebody had better be waiting for him, if they don't want to get the edge."

The two men passed on out of hearing; and it was not at all necessary for Tenderfoot Tom to hear any more. He had learned that the professor had pulled through without harm, and that he was in some danger himself. When the way seemed clear he arose and followed from afar, reaching Bunco without interruption.

As he entered the Jefferson House the Chinaman touched him on the shoulder.

"Glil wantchee see grasswood man belley muchee. Hop lound first chop ch'boy."

"Tell her I'm 'round, but ter sing low. There's b d men on ther move, and I'm her only hold."

"We Wailo tink grasswood man all look-sepidgin. No mattee, Chinees allee hunkee dolle, g'alow. Hai yah!"

With the contemptuous expression of his belief that Bowers was all a sham, We Wailo skipped away to attend to his duties, which were numerous if light; but he found time to bring Miss Vandeleur and the Flat from Walnut Bar together, shortly.

"Well?" she said, interrogatively.

"Well, I didn't do jist so bad er jist so good; but ef things work right I think I've caught on, sorter. Ther perfessor toted me along out ter Browne's mine, an' they talked ez though I might go ter w'uk thar. Thar wa' a leetle racket got kicked up, an' ez thet warn't pericely in ther bill, I cut out; but I'll come ag'in. I kin tell yer fur one thing, ther's more ner you an' me got eyes on this hyer Browne."

"And why? Who else here has an interest in him? What have you learned?"

"Not much; but I'll know more. Mebbe ther'll be a racket hyer ter-night, an' I'll hev ter skip; but ez long ez I kin stand ther pressure ye'll find me doin' my level best. I ain't much ter look at, but ef yer jist trust ter Tom Bowers you'll find him in town, when ther round-up's over. All I'm afeard on is that some 'un'll be nosin' 'round axin' what ner blazes you're after. I wanted ter gi'n yer a hint. Good-lookin' gals are ska'se hyer; an' Bunco's mighty suspicious."

"Thank you for the warning," answered Miss Vandeleur, who had been regarding him with a steady stare.

"I have already given an account of myself that will disarm suspicion—and have had an interview with the landlord, here, that turned out better than I had dared to hope. I am indebted partly to you for some hints and I will still trust you; yet I doubt you at times. Beware if you would play me false."

"What yer take me fur?" exclaimed Bowers, indignantly.

"For something, perhaps, that you are not. Enough of that. There is one thing I want to mention to you. Last night my life was threatened by a woman—a woman young and handsome. To-day I can find no traces of her in Bunco. I want you to search for her, and see if you cannot do better. Be sure and excite no suspicions. If you keep your eyes open you may find some one watching me; and then the chances are that it will be she. It may be that my life will depend on this. For some reason she hates me—I wish I knew why."

"Mebbe she's a friend ov Browne's?" suggested Bowers, who at once seemed interested.

"What were she like—dark er fair, old er young, big er leetle?"

"Young, dark, of medium hight. It does not seem possible that she could be a stranger here; but why should she wish to kill me, upon whom she had never laid eyes before?"

"Bet yer ther's a man in ther case," said the flat, soberly.

His words had an instant effect. Miss Millie's face suddenly flushed, her eyes flashed and her lips parted as though for speech.

Then, without a word in answer, she turned

away and closed the interview. If she could trust Bowers she had said enough to put him on his guard. If she could not trust him further words might only harm herself.

Bowers looked after her thoughtfully.

"Suthin' ov the spittire 'bout her—ain't all mush an' merlasses. Dunno what ter make ov sich er gal. Wonder ef it could be me ther black-eyed gal are arter? Oh, glory! Tom Bowers on ther mash! I kin see it—over ther left—but I wonder what ther perfesser would say ter that?"

That the professor might be angered at the way Bowers left him in the lurch never seemed to enter the thoughts of that individual, and his own conscience was evidently at ease in the matter. He loafed around Bunco for the rest of the afternoon, eat his supper with a good appetite, and afterward with unblushing frankness held out his hand to the late-arrived Elderberry, who seemed to be another man of much the same kind.

"Yer skinned 'em alive, so they say; but I bin a-waitin' ter hear full perticklers. I didn't leave till my time come, an' I wouldn't 'a' done no good by stayin'."

The professor shook hands warmly.

"Aw, ther's not much to tell. I had, aw, a personal difficulty with one Madden, aw, and I was the victor. I, aw, learned once how to strike and guard, and, aw, I don't forget much."

Then the professor gave a brief history of the row, as already related, and Tom Bowers shook his head when he heard that the gang he had seen wildly clamoring for blood would be turned loose in town an hour after dark.

He had little faith in such sudden conversions, and so he said, and he promised himself that he would keep out of range when the bullets began to fly; for the professor did not seem to mind his warning a bit, and went off to speak to Hunter Browne, who had left the house shortly before his superintendent had arrived.

It was while the Flat from Walnut Bar was communing with himself how he could best and most safely spend the evening that Plumb-Center Pete found him.

"I've b'en lookin' fur yer, Tommy, an' it's jest a good ole chance I found yer. I want ter gi'n yer a p'int thet may er may not be w'uth suthin' ter yer. Ther's a man ez moves when yer pull on ther handle ov Kale Carter, an' he's hot fur slaughter soon ez he sees a chance ter pull yer in. Ye'r' a good leetle man, an' I'd hate ter see yer checks passed in jest ez ther game war gittin' interestin'. W'ot yer b'en a-doin' to him? I tried ter pump him, but he wouldn't tell."

Bowers shook his head.

"Bless yer soul, Mr. Blockey, I ain't b'en doin' nothin' ter nobody; an' ez fur Carter—I don't know him. Couldn't you tell him how he's mistook, an' argy ther matter? I'm a peaceable man, I be, an' I don't want no trouble with nobody."

"It ain't no use. He won't listen ter reason, an' honor bright, he's an awful bad man. Ef I war you I'd make up my mind mighty sudden, an' I'd either fight er skip. Ef not, pay fur a wooden overcoat, cash in advance, an' save ther charity fund ov ther town ther funeral expenses."

"Sure, you don't mean that. Why, Mr. Blockey, I ain't no fightin' man, an' I didn't never do no harm ter this Mr. Carter."

"Tell that ter ther marines, Tommy. I guess when ther pills are in order you'll see Kale git his full dose. I only thort I'd gi'n yer warnin'."

"Thankee, Mr. Blockey; but why don't yer help me out? I've got suthin' ter do hyer, an' ef I'm all ther time a-watchin' fur him whar'll I kin out at? Keep him off an' I sw'ar I'll give yer suthin' handsum'. I kin go ez high ez five dollars right now."

Plumb Center Pete laughed. The size of the offer was not as ridiculous as the tone of the man who made it, and Blockey was inclined to enjoy himself at the expense of the party who could allow his fears to run away with him.

"Don't laugh," continued Tenderfoot Tom. "I'm jest made fur gittin' inter scrapes—an' it's only hog luck ez gits me out. Ther kunnel ain't 'round—he's sorter my gardeen—an' ef yer war squar' ye'd help me out till he comes."

"Oh, dry up on that. One way er t'other, ye'r' ther dog-gonestest fraud outen jail. Ye'r' playin' it on me, er yer playin' it on Miss Vandeleur; an' I wouldn't half mind takin' a shot at yer meself. I warn yer I wouldn't go outdoors ter-night, not fur no money. Thet's all. Ef yer does they'll be a racket."

Pete would listen to no more after that, and simply shrugging his shoulders at the appeal that Bowers was about to make, he hurried away before the first half-dozen words were spoken.

"Mebbe I kin skeer him off ther track," suggested Blockey to himself. "Ef he's what I think, it's a shame ter kill him; an' ef he ain't, Kale Carter 'll bring him, sure; an' either way will keep his nose out. Ef it don't I'll take a hand in an' try what he's made ov."

Very shrewdly taken; but perhaps even Plumb Center Pete did not entirely understand the tenderfoot.

CHAPTER XVIII. IN TOWN.

For some little time Bunco had been on its good behavior. Several bad men had been lately killed off, and a lull had occurred in affairs, though no one would be very much surprised at learning that they had opened up again with all the vigor that had given to the town the full meed of her reputation. The single fact of Mr. Albright being picked up in the street in a condition necessitating a funeral, caused no excitement; and if any one heard of the raid on the town that was contemplated by Buck Beans and the rest of the men in the employ of Hunter Browne, it gave no uneasiness. Things went on just the same—even to the fandango at Hazard Hall.

Everybody went there at times, and though now and then there was a fracas on such nights, the place had, perhaps, a better reputation than it deserved.

The large room was full of dancers, and the jollity was at its hight, when a terri c whoop announced a new arrival. Through the door came a number of men, with Buck Beans at their head, half dragging, half leading, Professor Elderberry.

The new superintendent looked very much the worse for wear, though he had only fairly started on the night's dissipation. If he was in such company the inevitable corollary was that he had been drinking.

The truth was he had been pouring down fire-water freely, and instead of making him foolish it appeared to render him sullen. He said but little, as he paid for drinks for his men, and then stumbled away from the bar toward a corner in which there chanced to be an empty table and a seat, into which he dropped without any one attempting to hinder.

For a little while he stared around with an owl-like gravity; then he turned around and dropped his arms on the table. He was not asleep, as was indicated by his occasional movements; and if any had noticed him, it would have been thought he was simply trying to recover the wits that had started to wander. Just then no one did notice him; for the crowd at the bar drew the majority of the eyes thitherward, and the dancers claimed the balance.

With music ringing, feet going, the bar busy, and Optime Charley dealing faro in one of the side rooms, things were very much livelier than they were the night before, when the hours were dedicated to short cards and the casual drinkers.

As for the ladies at the Hazard Hall, they were the quieting feature that generally prevented bacchanalian revelry, and the fatal fracas. They were, for the most part, daughters, and even wives, of the miners, and by a general tacit understanding, they were all masked.

The disguises might have been more thorough, but no one was inclined to be critical, and in case any one was puzzled, he accepted the situation with a laugh. If he attempted to be inquisitive he got a hint, and if the hint had to be repeated, it came again in such a solid shape that somebody or other got hurt.

The presence of Buck Beans and his gang was rather a menace, for they were filling up in a way that showed they were after whisky rather than dancing, and they were not of the stamp to swallow much fire-water without its having a bellicose effect. A few men were preparing for row; but the dancing and music went on without cessation, the devotees of Terpsichore making the most of their opportunities while they lasted.

"What's the meaning of this?"

Plumb Center Pete had come out of the card-room upon hearing the racket, and the first man he met, so to speak, was Hunter Browne, who touched him on the arm as he asked the question.

"You orter know," answered Blockey, with a snort.

"Goggle Gawge are on a tear, an' bez brung his crowd erlong with him. He's a brisk young man fur a tea-party, ez yer kin see ef ye'll cast yer eye over ther gang from ther Bunker Hill. Ef he's got 'em thet bad used up ther fu'st night, what'll they be when he's hed 'em in his private trainin' fur a month er so?"

Browne stared at Blockey, and then stared at Beans. He did not catch on to the drift of Pete's remarks.

"Oh, mebbe yer didn't hear w'ot a riotin' ole time they hed up thar this P. M., after you left. Thet sport in spectacles jest waded through ther crowd ez though he traveled on his muskel, an' gloried in it. He slaughtered Mike Madden, laid him out stiff erneugh ter cut up inter whalebone, an' then axed 'em all in fur a big drunk ter-night. They're hyer."

"I see they are," said Browne, dryly, and then there was a shade of annoyance on his face. "I heard there was some little trouble after I left, but understood the professor talked them into a good humor, and work went on as usual. Confound him, he draws over everything so that half the time I can't make head or tail out of what he says, unless it's about business. Then he's a different man. When he talks ore he's right there, every time."

"Mebbe you didn't s'pose there'd be a racket ef yer went away an' left him alone with them innercent lam's ov yourn?"

Browne gave a short laugh.

"I guess you want to find out what kind of a man you've got hold of when you put him to work in a place like mine. They would have known better than to be too rough; but if they could have run him out, easy, I'd have bunched the cards and started in for a new deal."

"Not much mud erbout ther perfesser; he's all sand, assorted sizes, an' sixteen ounces to ther pound. Only, see hyer, Browne, take keer he don't run you out. There's things bin did that wer'n't half so likely. But I ain't sayin' anything ag'in' him, recomember. He may be squar' ez a die, ez fur ez I know."

"Don't fret yourself about that. I've got a square hold and I'll keep it, unless some one jumps the claim that's got more nerve and sixes than I carry."

"But it strikes me ef all ther boys kin be brung off ter Bunco on a racket, it wouldn't be a bad time fur some 'un ter slide in. Eh? Who's thar now?"

"Don't ask foolish questions," responded the mine-owner, shortly. "This isn't the place to palaver over them, anyhow."

"Thet's so. This are the place fur sixes, an' I hope yer hev yours along. It strikes me ther racket are about begun. Ah!"

There had been some crowding and harsh talk around the bar, and at this moment there rung out the sharp crack of a pistol.

Fortunately the shot went wild, striking overhead, and without an instant's delay, the man, who had fired at the bartender, was caught up, his weapon being wrested from his hand, and he was given a fling toward the door. As yet the fighting era in the night's history had not set in.

Up went willing hands to catch the unfortunate shootist, and from one to another he went, sailing overhead, his progress never ceasing for an instant, until finally he was tossed fairly into the street.

No one went out to inquire whether any bones were broken.

Only Browne, Plumb Center Pete, and a few others had seen his final exit, but every one knew what his fate would be, and cheerfully concurred in his mild punishment.

It was Plumb Center Pete's curiosity as to whether he knew the man that led him to look after him with more than ordinary earnestness; and he gave vent to an exclamation of surprise that caused Browne to follow the direction of his eyes.

Through the doorway came two persons, who had made a narrow escape from a collision with the unfortunate.

One of the two was Tom Bowers, who halted just inside. His companion was masked; but in spite of a change in garments, and an attempted disguise in her walk, Blockey recognized his late fellow-traveler, Miss Vandeleur.

She was better at home than her escort, and dropping his arm, she immediately mingled with the crowd.

"By glory, what does she want hyer?" was Pete's mental comment; and it did seem a natural one.

The girl was very well disguised, and perhaps Blockey would not have recognized her if he had not seen her company.

But Tenderfoot Tom was not likely to have made many if any acquaintances in Bunco; and if he had brought Millie Vandeleur there it was not likely that he had done so of his own idea.

For that reason Pete Blockey asked himself what she wanted there, and added:

"If she had ter come, why ner thunder couldn't she hev caught on ter me? I'll keep an eye on her, fur I reckon if there's one ov ther old time rows Tommy'd look out fur number one."

Hunter Browne saw the Flat from Walnut Bar, and took no interest in him. While Pete was cogitating he seized the opportunity to glide away, never recognizing Miss Vandeleur at all. He did not even notice when Kale Carter brushed past him, with an angry gleam in his eye.

Plumb Center Pete was more observant. He caught the expression, and for some reason it did him good. He turned away, and then gave a slight, quick movement backward.

The result was he came into collision with Carter, who uttered a wicked growl as he looked to see who it was that had so clumsily got into his way.

Blockey was innocence itself, and his eyes had a far-away look.

"Where are you pushing to, man?" rapped out Carter, and just as he spoke Plumb Center Pete saw Bowers, who had taken alarm at the first movement of Carter, dodge out of the door in instant retreat.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLAT INVESTS FIVE DOLLARS ON THE QUEEN.

WHEN Kale Carter, after his exclamation, turned again, he found no trace of the gentle tenderfoot, and though he was shortly on the spot where he had seen him last, and making cautious inquiries there was no one who had

noticed his exit, or would give him any information.

As it appeared likely that he had mingled with the crowd, Carter seemed to decide to bide his time, and leaned against the wall with folded arms.

"He war goin' fur ter git even, war he?" chuckled Pete.

"Ef yer don't watch a weasel yer consarned apt ter find that he ain't thar. Now, what ner blazes are Goggle Jawge after?"

The professor had risen from his seat, and without a glance around was making straight for the door.

"Good-by, ole man. Ef yer strike some ov ther Bunco toughs yer leetle game won't be doin' yer much good, onless ye'r a durned site more sober ner ye look. I wouldn't wonder if, in a few minnits, there would be sounds from home outside. I b'lieve I'll go out and listen."

There was a shade of delay in making his way to the door, and by the time he reached the open air the professor had made more progress than was expected. In the distance his rapidly retreating footsteps sounded faintly, while close at hand there was a coarse laugh.

"Yer come at him too fierce, Billy," said a voice. "Ef yer hed gi'n him more time he'd bin too skeered ter skip. It war a caution how he run away."

"Yes, curse him, he run like a house afire; but he'll pull up afore long. That's ther good ov havin' two strings to ther bow. Listen an' see ef yer can't hear him drop."

There was no answer. The two men, as well as Plumb Center Pete, were intent on what was to take place further on down the street.

"Curses on it!" suddenly cried Billy Gray, as a couple of flashes flared up, beyond which they could distinctly see the figure of the still running professor.

"He got by ther careless galoots, an' they hed ter use ther irons."

"Er somebody else hez chipped in. Come on; we'll go down an' take a hand in."

"Guess not, boyees!" said Plumb Center Pete, his words exploding like fire-crackers, and the sharp clicking of his pistol-hammers emphasizing his warning.

"Fair play, boyees. When two mounts one, Pete Blockey are around!"

The surprise, and the mention of his name, completely demoralized the lurkers. They wheeled and fled the other way, while Blockey, the coast being clear, hurried off in the direction whence he had heard the shots.

When he had about reached the spot, he found there had been a mistake somewhere.

Two men were doubled up in a heap, perfectly motionless. If they had tried their hand at shooting, they had certainly got the worst of it.

"Humph! Dog-goned curious," he muttered, as he bent over the fallen men.

"Looks as though some one else had chipped in an' hit ther wrong pigeons. I'll swear he didn't stop long enough ter lift his sixes—if he kerries sich useful articles ov household an' kitchen furniture. I'd give five dollars ter know jest who's bin stackin' ther keards."

"Flo'k oveel! We Wailo bin loundee, shootee ebley time 'way uppee. No let lobber lun 'way with Goggly Jawge. Hi-yah!"

"You consarned heathen! you mean ter say yer hev bin shootin' down Christian white men? I ain't killed er victim fur a week, an' I've half a notion to begin on you."

Blockey spoke in such good earnest that We Wailo disappeared with the same mysterious suddenness with which he had come. To be sure, he only jumped into the shadow of a shanty and then slipped away, but there was something weird-like in his coming and going.

"I hed order shoot ther frisky heathen," sighed Blockey, regretfully. "Ef ary 'spicious chap come along, they might think ther two stiff belonged on my private di'ry. Lemme see ef I know 'em. Sho!"

The men were not dead after all. They moved, and one of them sat bolt upright.

At sight of that, Pete Blockey took a leaf out of We Wailo's book. Sliding into the shadow, he left the two men to their own devices; and as neither the professor nor the Chinaman were in sight, he made his way back to Hazard Hall, where things were going on much as when he left.

His first movement was to look around for Miss Vandeleur.

It was not so easy to pick her out now, for there was a good deal of sameness about the appearance of the ladies when viewed through the crowd; but finally he thought he had found her.

She was standing in the corner lately vacated by Elderberry, and Kale Carter was trying to engage her in conversation.

It was not hard to see that his presence was undesired, and that the girl was looking for a line of retreat.

"He's foolin' 'round er gentle leetle cyclone," thought Pete, as he edged toward the two, though taking care that his progress in that direction should not attract attention.

Chance favored him, for just then there was a general movement that brought him right in

their neighborhood, without the least effort on his part. While his attention was apparently directed elsewhere his ears were open, and in spite of the medley of confused sounds he heard something of the conversation.

"Yer needn't look after ther flat; he knows when ter take a through ticket an' go. He knows I'm goin' ter kill him some time but he ain't in a hurry about passin' in so he's slid out, an' now I want a leetle squar' talk with you."

"Threatened men have a double lease on life, and if you really menace the man who accompanied me here—he will dance after your funeral. Be careful that he don't help to lay out the corpse. I am not to be frightened; and I wish to hear nothing from you."

"Mebbe not, mebbe not; but I want to hear something from you. You, Allbright an' ther capt'n set up a game an' draw'd us in. Because Allbright's dead we ain't goin' ter let go. Ef he didn't tell yer I tell yer now. We're yer pards an' yer don't throw off on us nohow. Ef yer try it there'll be blood on the moon, even ef Capt'n Trouble hez sold us out an' backs you up."

"I do not know what you mean. The name of Captain Trouble I never heard before, and if Mr. Allbright had any dealings with you they were not authorized by me."

"That won't wash. I knowed last night yer hed changed yer base—an' ter git rid of us you'd sell us out. We got word hyer ter watch Trouble when he come back; an' we're doin' it. Ef you, an' him, an' Johnny Short thinks ter git away with us, ther sooner we strike in ther better. There's no go between now, an' this are yer last chance. Make yer bid an' play us fair."

"I have no bid to make, and fair or foul I will hold my own. Bunco will give even a woman a chance."

"Such a chance as it give Allbright—a wood-en overcoat."

"Very well, try to fit it on and there will be a call for a dozen."

Miss Vandeleur was at her best, and dealt with Carter as man to man.

"More. I don't believe that I will fill one either; I don't know who you are; and I don't believe I care to know, in spite of the interest you profess to have. I only give you warning and pass on."

She attempted to move away, and the apparent confidence in the movement actually threw Carter off his guard. He gave back the least bit, and she took advantage of the opening for escape.

He wheeled an instant later, but she had already entangled herself in the crowd, and if he desired further converse with her it was not hard for him to see that he had lost his chance.

No doubt she was aiming straight for the door; and in that direction Kale Carter cast his eyes.

Plumb Center Pete, who was watching him curiously heard him grind out an oath, and his eyes instantly went same-ways. In the doorway he saw what it was that had called up the unrighteous expression:

"Bu'st my sixes ef thar ain't Tenderfoot Tommy ag'in, large ez life. Are ther dog-blasted fool hyer fur a racket, er hez he come back ter look fur ther twinklum dew-drop? Betcher life ther band strikes up, fur Carter are ez nigh ter a fightin' loonytick ez they make 'em, an' I can't make him b'leve he's wastin' powder."

The man with the whip did not seem altogether easy in his mind. He hesitated a moment and then came slowly forward, looking this way and that, though by chance his gaze never reached Carter.

"Ef ther galsees him an' freezes onter him he'll take her away, an' then ther frolic'll begin outside. Ef not Carter ain't quite sich er fool ez not ter work ther matter up so ez ter save his own neck—he can't shoot him right down, hyer in Bunco—an' it strikes me it'll be worth seein' how he gits down ter biz. An' mebbe Tommy ain't sich a fool ez he looks. I'm goin' ter stick by an' see it out."

Miss Millie did not appear to see him, and it was doubtful, after a little, if she would since she had slipped so thoroughly out of view that Blockey began to believe that she must have left the room.

Instead of seeking the bar Bowers turned into the faro-room, and by the time that Carter and Pete Blockey had got near to him the Flat from Walnut Bar had obtained a good position, close to the table.

"Ef he's lookin' fur a chance fur a row I'll swar he couldn't hev picked a better place," thought Blockey, as he took in the situation.

There was a good deal of wild playing going on, and though a semblance of order had so far been observed there were too many half-drunk players not to make the chance good for a difficulty.

Buck Beans, the leader of the gang from the Bunker Hill, was there, and had been at work for some time, playing with a diversity of luck that was more exasperating than a steady streak of losing would have been. At that precise moment he was about even, having just lost half a dozen small bets, one after another.

When he threw down half a dozen chips on the queen and won, Blockey shook his head.

"That's somethin' rotten right hyer," he muttered.

"Ef ther thing keeps on there's goin' ter be ther dog-gonedest time outen jail. I'm stayin' hyer, ter see."

At that moment the Flat from Walnut Bar dropped five dollars on the queen.

CHAPTER XX.

IN HOCK.

THE balance of the deal went through with solemn regularity, and the queen never came out once.

There was a very good reason for that since the gentle females had all made their appearance early in the deal, as Mr. Bowers might have seen if he had taken the trouble to consult the cue box.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned," was his surprised remark as the last card came into the door. "That's the best luck I've hed in Arizony. All that fun, an' it hain't cost me a cent."

"Not a cent," said Mr. Cole calmly, as he swept the stakes up into his own heap, and then looked up with a quizzical leer in his eye.

"Dog rot yer picture, what yer mean?" howled Bowers. "Dyer think yer kin come any ov yer skin games over me? Jest lay that back er they'll be war right hyer. I ain't no tenderfoot ter stand sich crowdin' ez those."

"Go slow there, Tommy, and don't try to get up a muss here. If you're one of the squealing kind you ought to ask after the rules of the house before you plank down your money."

It was evident that Cole had full confidence in his heelers for when he had delivered his opinion he began to shuffle the cards without paying further attention to the man at whom he had just aimed his broadside.

If Bowers did not know how to frame an answer in words he had one in deeds all ready. It was natural that his instincts should go to his whip, which was a weapon that he could use, as had been proved on several previous occasions. On this it started to come into play once more. His hand gripped the stock, and the lash gave a flirt into the air.

If he had struck straight for Optime Charley's face as he very well might have done, nothing could have saved the jaunty dealer; but there was a preliminary flourish and while the lash trembled in the air a set of strong fingers closed upon it. When he attempted to bring it down the result can easily be imagined. There was a jerk, a howl, Tenderfoot Tommy was wheeled half-way around; and Kale Carter was left in possession of the whip.

What followed was as hard to describe as the antics of a hurricane.

As the Flat from Walnut Bar wheeled, a chair rose from right at his side, apparently of its own volition. The man who had been sitting in it went sprawling, and Carter, who drew with one hand as he snatched at the lash with the other, went staggering back, just as Billy Gray and another ruffian like to him sprung at Tenderfoot Tommy.

Bowers steadied himself, and shot out two blows, left and right that took effect, and then braced himself for the rush that immediately followed.

It was, for the time being, one man against the room, for the outsiders that broke up a game when there were few losers had no friends. There were plenty of men then ripe for a general row; and that fact had an element of safety in it, as the usual pistol practice was postponed until after the assault with fists had had its turn.

Somehow the blows intended for Bowers failed to connect after the schedule, and as they had to reach somewhere there were some hard raps given and taken, that produced the natural effect. Before another minute had passed Kale Carter and his chief of staff were under a score of trampling feet, and each man who could remain upright hit wherever he saw a head.

Bip, bip; bang, bang!

The blows poured in and there was the liveliest racket going on that Hazard Hall had seen for many a day.

In the midst of it all two men shot out of a side door that led to the rear of the building. Plumb Center Pete had locked his fingers together and dropping his arms around the tenderfoot, so as to pinion him completely, had, by main force dragged him out of the melee.

As they came in'o the open air they fell apart, and then, quick as a tiger, the man that Plumb Center Pete had hauled out sprung upon him, with a gleaming knife in his hand.

"Cuss yer, stand aside. Kale Carter's my meat, an' I'm goin' ter trim him up afore this frolic are over. Git outen ther way; I don't want ter hurt yer."

"Guess not, Tommy. Yer uncle Ezra hez suthin' ter s'y 'bout that. You let Kale Carter be, er you'll hev ter settle with me."

Blockey was cool as an iceberg while he spoke, yet he drew a twelve-inch bowie and planted himself squarely across the track of his would-be antagonist, who ceased his mad rush as he saw the movement.

"Look out fur yer ears, Tommy. I'm goin' ter larn whether they be iron-clad, copper-fastened, Al clipper-rigged, fast-sailin'. Do yer partiest, fur afore this fou't are over I'm goin' ter see whether you be a man er not. You've been puttin' on innercence long ernuf ef it's all a flam."

"Git out o' my way, Pete, ef yer don't want ter be hurt. I tell yer it's Kale Carter er me, some time er other, an' this hyer are my night on. Next time he won't spring his rattles, an' I won't hev no show."

"Not to-night, Tommy. I'd sooner yer took water; but ef yer don't, fou't yer must."

"Fou't it be, then. You're too big fer yer britches, anyhow, an' hyer's ther boy ez kin give yer a lesson."

Plumb Center Pete, outside of the danger of the chances, was taking a very good way of gaging the amount of sand the tenderfoot carried. If he backed down, of course, that was a settler. If he fought, it would take a wonderfully good fencer to get the better of Blockey with a knife.

Without longer hesitation, Bowers advanced, and the two blades crossed with an angry clang.

The knife is the test of courage every time; and the man that can hold his own in a scientific duel with an expert is to be counted no slouch.

Blockey found before long that he had his hands full. When the sharp steel touched him once or twice, drawing blood, and he felt his own careless thrusts easily parried, he began to understand the nature of the contract he had undertaken. In addition, he lost his temper somewhat, and began to show an eagerness to make his blows count, that he had been far from feeling.

"So yer reely think yer kin get at ole Pete with yer rib-persuader. Ah, how's that? Missed, did she? Hyer's another, an' hyer's another. Eh, glory!"

Blockey jumped back like a cat and stared at his antagonist. It was not that every one of his straight vicious thrusts was avoided, but that Bowers, instead of taking advantage of an opening, had made a clean and almost successful effort to disarm him.

"I reckon some one hez been mistook in this hyer circus, an' Kale Carter kin git on his knees fur thanks ez I shayed yer outen reach. Yer a desprit fighter, an' I dunno right what ter say 'bout this hyer affair."

Thoughtfully Plumb Center Pete began to pick his teeth with the point of his bowie. When he saw that the Flat from Walnut Bar was as coolly strapping his blade on the leg of his boot, he broke into a short laugh.

"That's ernuf. I wanted ter be sure yer war up ter some game, an' now I know it. Go 'long in. Ef yer strike Kale Carter, you kin give a good account ov yerself, an' I won't feel called on ter chip."

"Yer did more damidge than yer awar' a'ready," answered the other. "I war on ther war-path with blud in me eye, an' ther luck my way. Next time it'll be different, an' ef Tom Bowers goes outen ther wet, his ghost 'll ha'nt yer. An' ef any harm comes ter a leetle woman ez I'm tryin' ter keep an eye on, ye'll hev ter settle with me—an' I'll use er thing with er hole in it. You hear me?"

The tone of the speaker was so harsh, and his gesture so threatening, that it is likely enough Blockey would have felt called upon to take up the quarrel in earnest. Just as his hand dropped toward his hip, a feminine figure slipped out of the door.

The woman halted suddenly, looked sharply at the two, and then advanced with confidence. It was Miss Vandeleur.

"Come," she said, extending her hand toward Bowers. "This is no place for us. Those whom I sought are not here; and I have only thrust myself into frightful danger. They are killing men in there—take me away."

No wonder that the tones of the girl faltered a little at last. The noise of the riot within had deepened into an infernal racket, and they could hear shouts and shots at the front of the building.

Plumb Center Pete listened an instant, and then did not linger.

"Yes, git her away from hyar, Tommy, it ain't no place fur you an' her; but I'm goin' in. I reckon I ain't too late fur ther fun."

He rushed in through the door, which they heard him close, and lock behind him, and the two looked at each other in an inquiring sort of way.

"I am in earnest," interposed Miss Millie. "I have seen enough, and more than enough. I was mad to come here. Let us hurry away, while we have the chance to escape without attracting any attention. Unless I am again greatly mistaken in you, I doubt not but that you are as anxious as I to get away from this hateful place."

"I ain't sure ez I wants ter go. It's Kale Carter ez I'm gunnin' arter. While he's a-livin' there's danger fur both ov us; an' now would be a bully good time ter turn his toes up."

"He said you were a coward, and I believe him. Would you shoot him in the back like any desperate assassin? Come with me at once, or you will find that if I am only a willful

woman, I at least know how to work my own way."

She put her hand to her breast in a manner that was suggestive, and the man's eyes dropped before the blaze in hers.

"Hev yer own way," he answered sullenly. "I'll take yer back to ther Jefferson House. After that I'm my own man till I git even."

In silence the two went away, without a backward glance.

In a few moments they had come to the spot where We Wailo and Plumb Center Pete had had their interview.

About them all was quiet. They could hear the noises that they had left behind them, and the sounds of running feet in the distance, but here no one would have suspected that there was a single element of danger.

Yet that night the darkness seemed to be peopled with lurkers. Bowers halted and dropped his hands to his revolvers, but he was a shade too late. With a swish, something struck him sharply on the arm, and then a rope wound itself round and round him, until he received a blow from the heavy ball at the end, while Miss Millie, who had taken the alarm and given a bound or two, felt the grasp of a steel-like hand on her neck and was flung heavily to the ground. The two had run into an ambuscade, and in another moment were prisoners, bound and gagged.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE STORY.

HUNTER BROWNE had the reputation of being in the presence of danger a cool man, hard to handle; but he was not apt to anticipate or see the trouble until it ran plump upon him. When he had taken ordinary precautions, he let the future provide for itself.

He had no premonition of evil when he strolled into the Hall of Hazard to see what was going on there; and even after the surprise at seeing the most of his employees and the semi-warning of Blockey, he had no anticipation of impending danger, though he was conscious of a slight uneasiness.

Without making himself conspicuous, he took occasion to draw Beans to one side.

"What's the meaning of all this, Buck? I don't more than half like the way things look. If there's trouble here, there won't be much work done at the Bunker Hill to-morrow."

"Don't you fret, Mr. Browne. Ther new boss hes jest axed us in fur a leetle fun an' he set 'em up all round town; but we ain't on ther tear, ez big ez we look, an' we'll be gittin' out shortly. Mike Madden didn't feel much like comin' out ter-night, so be an' his 'chum, Kestone Black, are on ther watch. Ef ye'd ruther hev a couple more men thar I'll send 'em out."

"Oh, I'm not uneasy, and I guess it will all be right. Don't get too lively, and I'll risk the chances. I see Elderberry has crawled off. He's not much of a drinker."

"Not much; but he's ther best leetle man ez ever wore spectacles, and when yer git things in shape fur him ter git in his work things are goin' ter hum."

"I hope so," answered Browne.

The fact that Beans was so much more sober than he looked had a tranquilizing effect, though Browne had received a distaste for the amusements of the evening. A few minutes later he sauntered out, and turned toward the Jefferson House, without having any definite object in view.

He stopped, at several places on the way, consuming some little time, and without happening to pick up any acquaintances. As he moved away from the post-office he heard a familiar voice:

"Cunlee Blowne, ho, ch'boy!"

He waited at the call, and We Wailo came skipping up.

"We Wailo lookee ebleywha', no findee. G'il wantchee see Cunlee Blowne mucbee bad. Say heap shu' come in hap owl, numbee sixty-four, Jefferson House. Hap owl, go longee. Wailo take him find g'il light side top side g'low. Him come longee."

Browne nodded acquiescence, and strode away in a manner that kept the little Chinaman trotting. He understood that there was a young lady in sixty-four who had been anxious to meet him, and he knew that sixty-four was the number of Miss Vandeleur's room. From the moment he first saw her he had felt a strong interest in her, and so he was not at all averse to an interview. If the half an hour—rendered "hap owl" by We Wailo—had elapsed it was not likely to make any gr at difference.

At the door of the hotel the Chinaman put his hand on Browne's shoulder:

"Cunlee waittee heyah. If Wailo no come back ten minites Blowne go straight sixty-four. G'il no wantchee see 'um We Wailo come back shuah."

With this arrangement Browne, in view of the numerous duties of the Chinaman, was content, though he had an idea that Miss Vandeleur might have found a more intelligible person to arrange things. When, after ten minutes of waiting, the Chinaman did not reappear he accorded a five minutes' grace, and

than walked straight to sixty-four, and gave a gentle rap.

An unmistakable feminine voice told him to enter, and he did so without hesitation.

There was a lamp burning brightly, and the room seemed to be tenantless but as the door closed behind him Browne heard the key turn in the lock.

Whirling briskly he saw that he was in the presence of a young lady; and that she was a perfect stranger.

He smiled at the idea of locking the door, if the intention was to keep him in. The flimsy walls of the Jefferson House, would scarcely cage a kitten.

"Hunter Brown," said the young lady, eying him sharply. "I sent you word that I wished to see you, and I am glad that you have come. There is much concerning which I would speak to you, much about which I must and will know the truth."

"Excuse me, miss, or madam, I confess that you have the advantage over me. Do you think I am of the kind to give my confidence without knowing who receives it? And certainly you are a perfect stranger. I came here expecting to meet a Miss Vandeleur—who are you?"

"Who am I? Well, sir, caution was never one of my virtues, and whether for better or for worse I tell you the whole truth at once. I am the daughter of Nita Goytisolo."

"Ah, indeed. And who may the hereinmentioned Nita be? The name is unfamiliar, and I cannot see that the question can be one of interest to me, but courtesy requires that I ask it."

"You are one of those, then, that forget very well. I will bring certain truths to your remembrance. Of course you do not remember her. She was only Hunter Browne's wife. I am her daughter."

"It is false," answered Browne, quickly and sharply. "His wife was no outlandish foreigner, but an American woman, good and true, who died years ago. Her name was Florence Styles. The records will show it."

"Years ago. What of that? Hunter Browne is no infant—nor am I. Years ago I was a happy child, playing in the sand, waiting without impatience for the father that never came back unless by stealth. I have waited long enough; it is time to search for him. Perhaps he has been lost."

She spoke in a quiet tone, that gave little token of the excitement that Browne knew must be raging within. He stared at her without answering.

"Oh, you need not keep silent until you can conjure up some plausible falsehood," the girl continued.

"They kept the truth from me for years and years, but it had to come out at last. When it did I swore a great oath that justice should be done, and I am here for that, and nothing else. No rest have I know night or day. There is hot blood in my veins, and on one side at least I come of a race that has always moved quick to their revenge. I give you the choice—justice or death."

"My girl," interposed Browne, speaking in the calm, even tone of one who weighs his words, "you have certainly been woefully deceived. Your mother I never saw. If I had done so you have not yet made it clear why I should die in consequence. Who was she, where did she live, and what crime is it that you charge against me? Remember, I am not a fool-hardy boy, that might take delight in stirring up a feud, or warring with an unknown woman. During the last part of my life I have striven to be just to all; if you could show me that you had any claim upon me I would be just to you."

"I have told you I would speak only the truth. I mean to tell you all as briefly as I can. If it is bitter the greater is your fault."

"Years ago you were a gold-seeker in Mexico, a wanderer in a strange land. Wounded by Apaches in a desperate fight in which your two companions were killed you crawled down from where you had hid in the mountains, and begged your life at the hands of my mother."

"You were young then and brave, and I doubt not that you were handsome. In my brother's absence she took you in, cared for you, dressed your wounds and kept the little life you still had in your body."

"It was the old story over again—as it always has been, and always will be. She saved you; you won her heart. Then you married her, and a year afterward I came into this world, though my eyes never rested on you until a few days ago."

"Ahem!" said Hunter Browne, interrupting for the sake of interrupting. "I'm not so sure that they rest upon me now."

"It is no jesting matter, as you will find out ere I am done with you. You left her, and when the mangled corpse was brought back, that was supposed to be yours, the light of reason went from her eyes forever. Her heart was broken, and though she lived her reason was gone."

"For years the truth never was suspected—would not have been to this day had not my mother's brother learned it by chance. He

heard how Hunter Browne came back to the friends that had deemed him dead. He—my uncle—sought for revenge, but the villain escaped him. Now the hour when the hand of justice shall fall is ready to strike. One chance is left you. As well as you can, repair the harm you have done, the misery you have wrought. Fail in that and your doom is sealed!"

If the young lady was theatrical she was in earnest, as Browne could very well see.

He did not seem to be very much affected by her story.

"Do I understand that the elder lady in the case is still living?"

"She is."

The eyes of the girl were fixed eagerly upon him.

"And is a lunatic?"

"Made so by your fiendish desertion—yes."

"And your suggestion is that I adopt her as Mrs. Hunter Browne—of course taking you into my fold as my daughter?"

"It is."

"Thank you, then, I think I would rather not. In all this story, so far as I am concerned, there is not a word of truth. I never saw your mother, never was married to her; strange as it may seem, never was in Mexico. I have lived an open life here for twenty years, and there is not a living soul who would believe such a yarn. I have no wife, no child, no relatives, no nothing, except what I have in Bunco, and that I intend to hold on to with tooth and nail. It must have been some other Hunter Browne."

"I expected no other answer, yet I would not see even you attacked without fair warning and fair chance. Now, I say the priest lives who wedded you; the records exist; your course every day, from the time you passed over the mountain range to the present hour, has been tracked. All will be proved; and then—after that comes night and death."

The deadly earnestness of the girl would have shaken many men; it had no effect on Hunter Browne.

"Very well; prove it all, and I will still fight. Now, having said your say—and I admit that you have spoken remarkably well for a young woman brought up on the other side of the border—I must bid you good-night."

"Ah, I had not told you that. For years I have lived, in the East. In many ways I have become an American. All that is only another added wrong. How it happened, I was too young to understand. Only, my mother, with a glimmering of reason, says that Hunter Browne, not satisfied with the ruin he had wrought, sneaked back to look on his victim, and lest some day it should rise in judgment against him, stole the child away, and then abandoned it to the hands of strangers who were more merciful than he. I have been well and no thanks to him. Go, now—you go to your doom."

"One question. Are you the woman who came in on the stage last night—the young lady known as Miss Vandeleur?"

Browne halted at the door for an instant as she shot after him viciously the answer!

"No. A thousand times, no!"

"So much the worse for you, then. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BUNKER HILL GOES UP.

THE interview between Hunter Browne and the girl woman who claimed to be his daughter had been a trying one, though each wore a mask in the presence of the other. When Browne retired with something very like a threat Nita Goytisolo—for such was the name she had borne previous to her appearance at Bunco—sunk back on a seat and covered her face with her hands. The room was not a lucky spot for her since twice had she suffered defeat in it.

Hunter Browne did not give way to his feelings, but when he reached his own apartment he was evidently in a thoughtful mood. He lit a cigar, threw himself into a chair, and a hard, stern look came over his face.

For perhaps ten moments he remained thus, thinking deeply, then he arose and flung his half-consumed cigar out of the window with a vicious jerk, as he remarked to himself, in a distinctly audible tone:

"And the meanest part of the business is that the story is all true. I'm getting too old to fight for fun; but the uncle is going to keep me busy if I mistake not, unless he's going in for heavy black-mail. The girl is in earnest; and somehow I feel as if there was going to be a general round-up."

He was rising, whether to go out again or to retire he did not know himself, and thought on the question of what he would do was checked by hearing a sudden rush of footsteps along the hall, that came to his door and then ceased. Some one without was listening.

Then came a cautious tapping.

"Come in," said Browne, and the party entered, shutting the door behind him with a celerity that showed he was anxious to escape possible observation.

"Hello! It's the professor—what's up?"

The mine owner recognized the clothes, and above all the spectacles; and had an idea that George Elderberry was about to inflict on him some tipsy confidences.

"Sh!" answered the new-comer, stepping forward on tip toes.

"I ain't Elderberry; but don't yer breathe a word ov it."

It was Tenderfoot Tom, and in a high state of suppressed excitement.

"What confounded game is this?" asked Browne, sternly.

"For a first day my new superintendent is doing well. It's not enough that he must do his best to prove himself a drunken beat; but he must masquerade as a howling idiot. What do you want? Speak up."

"Go slow a minnit, an' ye'll hear suthin' ez'll make yer ha'r stand on eend. Ther perfesser ain't no more drunker than you be. He's jest a solid lectle man frum 'Way Back."

"I don't care what he is—or you are. This thing won't do."

"Hold on, jest till I git my breath. This hyer's ther way it war. Ther gal took er notion ter freeze on ter me, an' bein' ez ther kunnel ain't come, an' I war hard up, I sed, letter freeze. She wanted ter go 'round to ther fandango ter-night, an' I hed ter take her along. There I struck Kale Carter, betwix him an' me ther bein' some sort er onpleasantness, an' I skipped. Then ther perfesser come in an' said ther gal mustn't be left thar alone, an' ez I'd brung her thar mebbe he couldn't git her away ef she knowed it war him, so he tole me ter shuck meself; an' he crawled inter my clothes, an' I inter hissen, an' he went back, an' jest raised ther biggest time outen jail."

"Then I heared ther noise an' ther shoutin', an' crawled out, keeful like, an' now I'll tell yer what I heared. Thar was two ov 'em a-talkin', an' one ov 'em said: 'Mike Madden are goin' ter skip ther ranch, ther boyees are goin' ter pile in; an' to-morrer Hunter Browne kin jest open his eyes an' howl. We've got a priur tile, with ther law on our side, an' he kin dust er starve whichever he wants ter.' An' Elderberry an' Miss Millie are taken, an' thar's ther very dickens ter pay, anyhow."

Tom Bowers had not tried to shorten his story, or he might have saved a minute or two of valuable time. Now, when he expected an answer, question, or recognition of some sort, he got none, verbally; and the next instant he found himself lying on his back, too confused to know what had happened. Hunter Browne had dashed him out of his way with a side sweep of his hand that was a knock-down blow in everything but the name.

When Bowers staggered to his feet he heard a noise without, and looking from the window caught a glimpse of a man on a mustang. Hunter Browne was already mounted and speeding away for the Bunker Hill find. If he had known the true state of affairs there, he might, perhaps, have been a little slower in starting, and reached the spot a little better able to cope with the new and untoward order of things.

When the majority of the men employed at the Bunker Hill had turned their faces toward Bunco that evening there was no thought of any danger menacing the property of their employer.

Browne himself was largely to blame.

He was not aware of the fact that the men knew that he had been applied to by Plumb Center Pete, or that there was any dissatisfaction in regard to the choice that he had made. Had he known, he would have been more cautious.

Wishing to test the stuff out of which the professor was made he had given Buck Beans a pretty strong hint.

How that hint was acted upon the reader has already seen.

The result was a triumph for the gentleman in spectacles; and when he invited all hands to meet him at Bunco that evening it was nothing more than was expected; nor was the refusal of Mike Madden and his principal chum likely to cause any suspicion. Madden's reputation as a cruiser had suffered, and it was natural that he would feel a little sore over his defeat.

Hardly had the gang, headed by Buck Beans, left the shanties, in which they usually spent the night, when Madden made his appearance with a bundle under his arm.

"Yer comin', Ned?" he called, looking toward a neighboring hut.

"No, I'm hyer," was the answer, and a stout, squat-looking individual emerged, bearing a twin bundle.

"It's not very like I'd be stayin' back an' axin' Browne ter be takin' a divy outen my sheer ov ther lee'le pocket you an' me hed ther luck ter strike. Fur half a cent I'd put a light under ther shanty an' send ther hull thing ter kingdom come."

"I ain't sayin' I wouldn't like ter do it," retorted Mike, "but I ain't sot on passin' in my checks jist now, so I'll wait. Ef we skips, not knowin' 'bout ther pocket ez we cleared out, we ain't done no hurt, an' Browne sez let 'em go. Ef we blowed up things when we stopped you bet he'd ketch up."

"C'rrect yer be. Hyer's luck ter ther gals we leave behind us. I hope no one's goin' ter run away with things. Ef they does, guess they can't kerry 'em so fur thet Hunt Browne can't find 'em."

The men joined in a coarse laugh, and set off together, bending their course toward a narrow mountain trail at no great distance.

Four hours, perhaps, had passed before the stillness was again broken.

Then a long line of men—a score or more there were of them—came in sight, from the direction of Bunco.

They approached carefully, for the cabins were so arranged as to be an almost impregnable little fortress, and half a dozen good men, well armed, could have laughed at five times their number.

Just out of pistol-shot range the party halted, and one man crawled up to the cabins and disappeared.

In five minutes he had completed his explorations. Then he gave a low whistle which caused the immediate advance of the rest.

"Come without a fear," said this man to his nearing allies. "Senor Madden has been so good as his word. He has gone, taking his friend with him; and the rest are all gone also. Be quiet, though, till we get settled. It is late and the ruffians, they may be returning."

The warning came in time to check the cheer that was just beginning to go up as the men crowded in.

"We're in fur it now, Pereirer," said the foremost man. "Thar's hot times ahead, an' you'll hev a chance ter show whether your gripe are ez good ez Hunter Browne's nerve."

"It is your gripe and my nerve that are at stake," answered the senior.

"To hold the mine for me I pay you. My share of work will I do at Bunco, and in it, if it fails will there be the most of the danger. Do not give up. Keep them out. An army cannot drive you here unless you basely flee. Before many days Bunco will all be on my side, as the most of it is now."

"Don't yer be afeard. That's what we're hyer fur—honest miners we be from Glory Gulch, an' above thar, kim up ter help ther innercent, an' we'll hold on till ther cows' tails drop off."

"I can trust you to do that; and if there is to be a fight I'm not sure but that you will make it welcome. Now, since I have seen you in possession, I must go back. There are other strings to pull, and it is time that I was at them."

He gave a few hasty directions, and then hurried away. Evidently Pereira had had no intention of doing anything more than directing the attack.

He hurried down the trail until near the very spot where Tom Bowers had ambushed himself not so long before.

Then he heard the hard gallop of an approaching mustang, and drawing aside, Hunter Browne dashed by.

Pereira's hand rested on a revolver, but the weapon was not drawn.

"Better not," he muttered. "Somehow, the Satan's luck always has been his, and I might miss him again. The friends above a good account will give; and better for me will it be if they slay him. That mad girl else may force me into harm. His wealth it is first to make sure of. Then her life."

Browne suspected little of his danger there; but he was not the one to fall into a trap above.

His eyes were on the alert, and he suddenly reined up as he caught sight of half a dozen skulking forms beyond, who had not sought cover in time to elude his gaze. No friends of his could they be, and he jerked up his pistol and fired a single shot with unerring aim, then wheeled, just as a regular volley rung out in answer.

There was some pretty close shooting done, for Browne heard the bullets whistle over, uncomfortably near, as he dodged down in his saddle. Before there could be a repetition, he was beyond range.

Then a mocking voice called out: "Keep erway, Hunt Browne. You're bu'sted up root an' branch; an' we're in persession fur the rightful heirs."

CHAPTER XXIII.

SURPRISES ALL AROUND.

MISS VANDELEUR and her escort were whisked away so suddenly that they had hardly time to consider who had taken them away before they were out of the extreme limits of Bunco, and on their way into the intricacies of the mountains.

After that the chance of aid or rescue was slender enough.

It might have been less appalling for Miss Millie, had sight and speech been allowed her. As she was both gagged and blindfolded, all she could know or find out was that, mounted in front of a man of seemingly herculean strength, she was being conveyed with reckless rapidity along a rough and ever-rising road.

The way seemed interminable, and as there was no chance to pay much attention to her comfort, by the time a halt was made, she was,

between wear and worry, in almost an insensible condition.

Heroine or not the attack was too much for her. She did not even hear a harsh voice upbraiding her captor for not having treated her more tenderly. When released she simply sunk down in a little heap upon the rude couch near which she had been placed, and knew nothing more for hours.

Morning had dawned when she awoke from the troubled yet long sleep into which she had fallen. She opened her eyes and gazed around with wondering uncertainty.

The place was strange and very cheerless.

It was not even a cavern.

Overhead there was a ceiling of overhanging rock, but it was simply a huge niche in a rocky mountain wall. On three sides and above there was rock, on the fourth side the niche was open, and she saw beyond a broad ledge, with a narrow passageway at either end.

As she turned around she noted a man seated at the further end of the niche. There was something familiar in his appearance, and her first thought of course was that it was Tom Bowers. It required a second glance to tell her that she was mistaken, and that it was none other than Professor Elderberry.

It was the spectacles that first convinced her. After seeing them she was able to recover her wandering wits, and then became more confused than ever.

What was the meaning of his presence there; and what had become of Tenderfoot Tom?

She stared up at the professor wildly enough; while he regarded her with a benignant smile.

"What has happened?" she asked, making a brave struggle with what she half hoped might prove a nightmare.

"I am sure, aw, I cannot tell," he replied, with his customary deliberation. "If I could, aw, distinguish a possible motive I should say, aw, that we were prisoners."

"Prisoners! Why, how, and to whom?"

"The, aw, conundrums of daily life are always peculiarly exasperating, aw. Their solution requires patience and waiting. If, aw, they intended to remove us permanently it would have been done at once. Consequently, aw, someone will appear to explain the mystery, aw, and meantime I am, aw, very uncomfortable."

"I should think so. And hungry besides. But how did you get here and what has become of Bowers, the Flat from Walnut Bar as they will call him?"

"I was taken at the same time as yourself, aw, while escorting you home from the questionable place of resort known as, aw, the Hall of Hazard. Mr. Bowers, with commendable prudence, aw, left earlier in the evening."

"What is the use in any such rigmorole; you know there is no truth in it. If you tell me a deliberate falsehood, and one that I know is such, I have nothing left me but to believe that you are in some way responsible for this outrage. That—or that you were too drunk to know what really happened. Which is the most charitable supposition?"

Miss Millie was in earnest. Her eyes glittered. She rose to her feet with all of her courage and most of her strength recovered.

"Aw, neither are necessary. It is possible that there is some misunderstanding. You interrupted a little affair with that singular man who is known as Plumb Center Pete. But for him and you I would, aw, have returned to the Hall of Hazard, which would have been the better course. Instead, I led you away, aw, and we were suddenly set upon and treacherously taken. We are, aw, in enforced companionship, and, aw, I do not think it advisable that we should quarrel. If, aw, I appeared to resemble Mr. Bowers, that, aw, was one of the necessities of the case. If you would wait in patience, aw, events would doubtless give you a further explanation, aw."

The professor did not deem it worth while to rise to his feet. Miss Millie looked down upon him with scornful eyes, and then turned her back upon him, and marched to the furthest side of their prison pen. With such a man as he appeared to be, it was disgraceful to bandy words.

Elderberry, to be even, turned his back toward her, and contemplated the rocky wall above his head.

Miss Vandeleur held the most unpleasant suspicions in regard to this man, for she had not the remotest idea that on the previous evening she had been deceived. It is true that since their brief acquaintance had commenced he had been very much at her service, but she had only accepted his attentions because she could do no better. Now his presence began to be hateful.

Perhaps hunger had something to do with her feelings.

Before breakfast one is not always at his or her best; and if the meal is too long delayed, a quarrel with even a bosom friend is the most natural thing in the world.

After a few moments of silence Miss Millie thought of a dozen questions she would like to ask, and gave a sly glance over her shoulder.

The professor was still intent on the geological

formation; for all he seemed to care for her she might have been a thousand miles away. She saw him raise his finger, and move it along as though he was tracing the strata in an ecstasy of scientific discovery.

That he had forgotten her was an added insult. She had hated him as hard as she could, a few moments before; but still he was a man, and might offer a reasonable suggestion as to when breakfast might be ready.

"What are you doing there?" she said, sharply.

"Geologizing, aw!" responded Elderberry.

"You are. Don't you think it would be better if you were turning your attention toward devising some means for us to get out of this? Where are we?"

"I am sure, aw, I don't know."

"Have you looked about to see?"

"Naw."

"And you cannot tell what there is to hinder us from marching out through yonder opening and finding our way home without further molestation?"

"Naw, I have not looked. It is no use. If, aw, we were put here it was, aw, to stay. I shall wait, aw, upon developments."

"You may if you choose, but I am going to see. I shall probably find either a way of escape or a chance for my breakfast, and one or the other would be very acceptable just now."

There was some shrewdness in the suggestion, but it did not present any attractions for the professor. He retained his seat and manifested no desire to continue the conversation. He was simply and thoroughly resigned.

Miss Millie arose and looked around her more sharply; with no evidence of guards or barricades, it angered her to think that the idea of flight had not sooner suggested itself to her mind. She might at least have obtained some sort of an idea concerning the spot where she found herself.

But Miss Millie had lost time that was more or less precious, for as she moved out from under the overhanging rock she heard the noise of careless steps approaching, and immediately afterward a voice which had something strangely familiar in its tone.

"All right in thar, is it, boyees?"

"All right, capt'n. The two bez woke up an' bin a-chinnin'. Dunno what they said, but we bin a-lookin' fur 'em ter come out a-whoopin'."

"Let 'em whoop. I'll go down an' stir up ther anamiles."

The speakers were evidently on a higher grade. That explained the reference to going down. There was a noise that might be caused by one end of a coil of rope being flung some little distance, and shortly afterward some one dropped lightly to the stone floor of the ledge beyond.

Miss Millie folded her arms. Her captor, whoever he might be, was coming at last, and she made ready to meet him.

Without hesitation the man advanced, turned the corner of the wall of rock, and stood on the ledge, facing Miss Millie with a good-humored smile on his face.

Of all the surprises she might have imagined, this was the last.

The man before her was Plumb Center Pete.

"You!" exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, in amazement.

"Yes, me myself, individually—Captain Trouble, the man with the tin ear."

Blockey laughed cheerfully. Evidently he enjoyed her amazement, and had no desire to conceal his identity.

"Yer see, my dear, we've started ther round-up, an' it looks ez though our herd war goin' ter pan out well. I wa'n't quite ready fur you, I'll admit; but as Johnny Short was needed bad, an' you two war thick ez thieves, we hed ter pull yer both in."

"I don't understand," began Millie. "Who is Johnny Short, and what is the meaning of this outrage?"

"Johnny Short, my dear, are brief fur Tenderfoot Tommy, ther boss mountain detective, and the man that came down to Walnut Bar ter take Captain Trouble an' make a thousand dollars. That's who he is, an' he's got ther points down fine on yours truly. It's a condemned shame he won't never hev no chance ter use 'em. Eh! what ner blazes are this?"

Plumb Center Pete ceased speaking, and stared in wonder at the professor, who had turned so as to face the two.

The surprise was evidently genuine, and after catching that look Miss Vandeleur felt that she could no longer believe that these men were in collusion.

Blockey carried at his waist the usual paraphernalia of weapons, and his hands dropped instantly to them. When he had satisfied himself beyond a doubt that this man was Professor Elderberry, he advanced with a menacing scowl.

"Hyer, you! What's the meanin' ov this scull-duggery? Whar's Tom Bowers? How do you git hyer?"

"Bowers, aw," replied Elderberry, with ag-

gravating coolness, "in the language of the poet, aw, is in his skin. He begged me to take his place, and, aw, as I am tender-hearted I consented. You, aw, could have no feeling against me, and as it is natural, aw, that you should desire to remove Mr. Bowers, as I have so far known him, the substitution was, aw, to say the least, judicious. He tells me, aw, that the basis of your hatred lies in the fact that he got the better of you in a fight with knives, had in the presence of this young lady, aw."

Blockey was a little puzzled by the calm, even speech of the professor. He even looked sharply around to see if Tom Bowers might not be lurking somewhere near. It was not easy to understand how the substitution could have been effected.

"I'm kinder sorry," said Plumb Center Pete, at length. "You might ez well have kept outen this racket. I intended ter kill Johnny anyhow; but ez you know too gaul-durned much I'll hev ter kill you too."

As he spoke Pete cocked and drew his most convenient revolver.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DREARY OUTLOOK.

As there had been a change in her opinion, even though she did not know what to make of her companion in distress, Miss Vandeleur could not see unmoved the preparation for his slaughter. Without a thought of her own danger she sprung lightly in front of the professor, holding up both hands, and shielding him as well as she could.

"Hold!" she exclaimed. "What harm has he done to you? Would you murder him in cold blood?"

"That latter are about ther size ov it. It's not ter be expected ez you kin git ther rights ov it; but it's a clear thing he's got ter disappear. Things bez run too contrary fur any use, an' we've got ter make ther best ov 'em."

"But why—what? Oh, I cannot believe that such a wretch as you would make yourself out to be can live."

"Thankee, miss, but ther hard facts ov life bring out wretches by the bushel; an' I guess I'm 'bout ther average. I'm sorry fur you; but mebbe we kin arrange *your* affairs. We've ben fooled most oudacious by ther perfessur; an' ez he kin give ther hull thing erway we've got ter take him in."

"Why have you been deceived by him? Had you let him alone it is certain that he would not have troubled you."

"Thet's it; thet's jest it. He wouldn't 'a' troubled us—he war on a different lay altogether; but thet infernal tenderfoot bez jest fooled him right inter this; an' hyer we be. I'd give a hundred dollars ter know whether he seen you go; an' how much he knows about me, an' my sheer in it."

"Howsomedever thet's neither hyer ner thar. I'll allow I orten't ter git riled, er shed gore in ther presence ov a lady. I won't kill him jest now, an' I'll talk it over with ther boys. Mebbe we'll see our way cl'ar ter use him. Thar's another party after him, an' they jest missed puttin' his light out las' night by er ha'r's breadth. Prehaps we could make er trade. Take it easy. We'll send yer down some grub, an' you kin be thinkin' over ther vanities ov life fur ther balance ov yer days. I s'pose there ain't no use o' my axin' you who sold us out."

Blockey turned sharply to the professor, who by this time, had edged away from behind Miss Millie.

He shook his head gravely to the question.

"I know nothing about it, aw, except that you are a villainous reptile. Do your worst, aw."

"You'll sing a different tune before we get through with yer," responded Pete. "It's a cold day when Captain Trouble gets left on a job; we'll make our money outen yer mutton yit. So long."

And then, with something of the air of a lion-tamer as he departs from his den of beasts, Blockey stepped backward, until he was hidden beyond the wall of rock.

Then he went quickly along the little ledge, and catching at a rope, which hung down from above, made his way upward with wonderful agility.

The ascent was scarcely above a dozen feet. When he had crawled over the edge of the rock, and regained his feet he stood in the presence of three men, who were armed after the same style as himself, and had a rough, desperate look.

"Well, Cap," said one who appeared to be the recognized spokesman. "What yer make out ov 'em? How's ther job goin' ter pan out?"

"Pan thunder!" snarled Blockey. "You're a sweet-scented pack o' pap-fed calves. Dash your black hearts, you've got ther wrong man."

"Then it's acause yer pointed ther wrong man out," answered the first speaker in a sullen tone, that showed he was by no means pleased with his treatment.

"Mebbe it's ther wrong gal, too. Ef so, chuck 'em both over the ledge, an' we'll go back fur a new deal."

"No. The girl is right enough; don't yer dar'ter harm her till yer git ther word, unless

yer see suthin' happen thet she's bound ter git away. Then it's life er death, an' she may hev ter go. She's come ter an appetite an' I guess mebbe it's ez well ef yer gives 'em both a squar' feed. Blamed ef I know what ter do."

Plumb Center Pete was discussing an important problem in his mind.

"Who is this bloke, then?"

Blockey answered the question without looking up.

"I reckon he's about what he lets on ter be—ef he ain't he's in ther pay ov ther other party ez hez rung in ther Bunker Hill. Ef so I don't jest keer ter take him off. It makes a mix. Hold him hyer an' I'll go back an' see how things look at Bunco. Ef Johnny Short hes reely dropped ter me you kin look fur a riot; but I've got ter stand ther chances, an' so hez he, though I swear I hate ter send him over ther range till we know who give us away. There'll be no livin' in this gang till we find out ef thar's a traitor. Ef ther' are I don't guess thar's any doubt what's ter be did with him."

"He swings," responded the other.

"Then git yer rope ready, Dandy Dave, fur I'll show yer ther victim afore another twenty-four hours is over. Keep an eye on them two, an' see they don't give yer ther slip. I'll be back by night an' tell yer ther news. It's goin' ter come thick an' heavy now."

Pete Blockey left his minions to their own devices without further instructions and went his way. When fairly out of sight Dandy Dave proceeded to prepare the breakfast according to orders he had received. It was plain and substantial, being bread and meat, with a jug of coffee. Placed in a blanket it was lowered by means of the rope with which Blockey had descended, and then Dandy Dave hailed the prisoners who, so long as they were in the niche, remained invisible.

"Hello, down thar. Hyer's yer grub. Ef yer wants it one ov yer come an' take it afore it's drawed up ag'in."

The call was welcome enough to Miss Millie, who looked at the professor.

"You hear that—don't make them ask twice. I am starving. Go for it."

"Thanks; but, aw, it strikes me there must be some deep laid scheme and I would rather not. They may want to shoot me, aw. Go yourself and I will watch how the land lays."

Too disgusted to answer Miss Vandeleur stepped straight out from the shelter of the rocks, and advanced boldly to the wall, at the foot of which lay the bundle of provisions. When she had possessed herself of these she looked upward and saw Dandy Dave leaning over.

The outlaw had not an unhandsome face, and something of his appearance can be judged from his *sobriquet*. The men at his back could not see his features, and so did not note the smile that was on them, or the undeniable wink that he gave when Millie's eyes met his.

That young lady saw it, and was uncertain whether to be offended or hopeful. It had its meaning, no doubt, and she was inclined to take the best out of it. She nodded lightly.

"How long do you think you are going to keep me in this miserable hole?"

"Don't talk to ther guard," answered Dave, in a good natured rebuke. "It's ag'in' orders, an' 'll make yer trouble."

"Oh, I'm not anxious to talk, unless it is business. I only want to remark that if you desire to get any ransom out of me it is just as well to begin at once. There is no one in the world that would put up a cent for me, and I'm not going to grow rich while you keep me cooped up here. I have just one thousand dollars, but it is at Bunco. If one of you will accompany me back I will hand him that amount, swear to say nothing of this, and he can go on his way rejoicing."

"Thankee, miss, but money can't buy us. Go, eat yer grub an' when ther capt'n comes back you'll hear somethin' furdur."

And yet while he spoke Dandy Dave repeated a sign that somehow gave her confidence.

"You are an elegant man for a tea-party," was her exclamation, as she rejoined the professor.

"I had half a notion to make you go out there for your breakfast, or let you stay here and starve. What are you good for, anyhow?"

Professor Elderberry heaved a sigh at her sharp address.

"At present, aw, to eat. Some day, perhaps, aw, you will find out how you have mistaken my character. I know, aw, many things, but not exactly how to handle these people. It is better, aw, to keep out of danger as much as possible, aw, until I do. And I wouldn't talk much, aw. I think they are listening."

With such a man, on such a platform, it was little use to reason, and not much satisfaction to talk. They only seemed to have one point in common—the rations.

They discussed them in silence, and in fifteen minutes were much refreshed.

CHAPTER XXV.

RECAPED.

ALTHOUGH the place seemed so secure that the outlaws had not even attempted to impress

upon the minds of their captives the futility of any attempt at escape, Miss Millie was not to be satisfied without investigation. Having courage for two she went boldly out to the edge of the ledge and took a cool survey of her surroundings.

To the right the way was blocked by an overhanging wall. To the left was the alcove she had entered to receive the provisions. In front was a sheer precipice of perhaps fifty feet, at the foot of which was a small plateau, which looked green and inviting. It was reached by a narrow passage, bounded on the one side by a further precipice, on the other by a bank.

No one was in sight, though she could hear the near murmur of voices. Satisfied that there was nothing more to see, she returned to the professor, and described the position.

He looked from one side to the other of the niche, rubbing his hand through his hair, and readjusted his spectacles.

"If we were able to drop down there without bei g seen, aw, do you think our condition, aw, would be in the least improved?"

He spoke in a husky whisper, and the unexpected interest shown was sufficient to give the girl a thrill of hope.

"We would be no worse off, and might be better. At any rate it is worth the trying. Yet how can we get there? The precipice below is like the one that hangs over our heads."

"Wait and see. It is too soon, aw, to run the risks. By and by they will be less vigilant, and then, aw—a graduate of Harvard can do some things as well as others."

The professor had a profitable opinion of himself, after all; but as he stood there, with the tips of the fingers of his right hand pressed against those of the left, and his head thrown back, Miss Vandeleur was not afraid that he would set many rivers on fire. If she had not found talking to him such slow work she might have worked herself into a state of enthusiasm, but as it was she gave a bitter smile as he expressed an opinion in favor of waiting, and threw herself down once more on the couch that had served for her resting-place the latter part of the night before.

Her thoughts were more bitter than her smile had been if the varying expressions of her face went for anything; but in time the very excess of feeling wore her out, her eyes closed, and she dropped into a troubled sleep.

It may seem strange that slumber should overtake her under such circumstances; but though she was a girl capable of more than ordinary physical endurance, her rest for some nights had been so broken that she felt the need of rest and had the force of will not to resist its wooings.

She slept for some time, as she knew by the position of the sun when awakened.

Professor Elderberry was standing over her with his finger raised in warning.

Looking upon him in a startled way, for it had been his touch that had aroused her she saw him point toward the ledge over whose edge she had peered so hopelessly.

"Quick. Follow me. I have heard their steps moving away. We have a minute to get out of the range of their sight. Have courage, keep your head, and we will baffle them yet."

In his earnestness he had lost his drawl; he spoke firmly and with confidence.

Taking her cue from his whisper she nodded and rose, with a gesture that meant he should lead the way.

He did so. Without wasting time in telling her to precede him the professor swung himself directly over the ledge by a rope which was fastened to a huge boulder. The sight of it was a surprise, but she lost no time.

"Come," said his whispering voice, and leaning over she saw that he had loosened his hold upon the cord, and was standing upon a narrow shelf, barely visible from above.

Some women would have sickened at the risk; but Miss Vandeleur grasped the rope without hesitation and lowered herself hand under hand until her feet rested upon the shelf.

"Pity, aw, that we cannot get the string. Those whelps may see it, and though it is only a few feet long it might help us. But, aw, I think we can make the drop, aw, at the bottom. This shelf makes a regular path almost all the way down. The trouble, aw, was to reach it."

The professor told the simple truth.

It required care and labor, but clinging almost to the face of the rock the two won their way safely down until they came to what was the jumping-off place.

There the professor lowered himself by his hands as far as was possible and then let go.

With nothing more serious than a hard shock he struck the ground, and gathering himself together almost instantly he looked upward toward his companion, bracing himself as he whispered:

"I will catch you, aw; I assure you it is perfectly safe!"

There was nothing else to do so she dropped into his outstretched arms.

Stock in the muscular prowess of the professor rose fully a hundred per cent. He caught Miss Vandeleur, breaking the force of her fall

so neatly that she struck the ground as lightly as though she had only sprung from a horse.

"Thanks. You seem to have the strength of a dozen ordinary men. I know of no one who could have done that so well."

"Gymnasium, aw. I took everything I could obtain at college. And you are superbly gifted. But, aw, there is no time to talk."

Again the professor led the way, aiming for the natural gateway to the little glade.

The supposition was that those on guard above had no notice of their departure. For this reason they went on with some confidence—and all the worse it was for them.

Rising, as if by a spring, and from the ground, two men appeared before them.

They came with the drop, too. In each hand each man held a cocked revolver, and one, with a mocking laugh, exclaimed:

"Hands up, sonny! ha! ha! We ain't takin' chances. If yer crook yer finger, jest, we'll take yer all apart. It's shoot fu'st, an' argy afterward."

"Crook be hanged," growled the other in a deadly tone.

"Stand aside, miss, a' watch, ef yer want ter see him jump. We've hed foolishness enough—he's dumb ez a boiled clam—an' I'm goin' ter shoot."

Professor Elderberry looked straight into the muzzle of the poised weapon, and he could see, by the ominous knitting of the man's brow, that the shot was about to come, yet he never winced or started. He simply halted, as if to listen to what sort of communication these suddenly appearing men might have to make.

Miss Millie was not so cool.

She gave a sharp cry, and then stood, with dilated eyes and clinched hands, waiting for the deadly shot to come. Sometimes there is something in a tone of voice that tells beyond a doubt that its owner means business, and she recognized it here.

For herself she was not afraid; but at that moment she realized that there was no hope for her companion.

There would not have been the shadow of a hope for him if he had flinched a particle. The least movement on his part would have caused the finger on the trigger to tighten; and after that came certain death.

"Really, aw," he drawled, "it strikes me that, as I showed you a point not down in your books, common gratitude would assure, aw, a more cordial reception."

"We're not dealin' in gratytod," chuckled the outlaw, "but ef yer growlin' over this, -hat yer goin' ter say when we makes it hot? Sorry fur ye, pardy, but we hed orders ter kill yer ef yer tried ter escape, an' dash yer eyes, ye've actooally did it. Say yer prayers, if yer know any, an' then sail up ther flume."

"Prayers, aw, belonged to the elective course at our institution; I shall not say them to you. If you want to shoot, shoot me in the back, aw. You ain't fit to have a man face you. Good-by, Miss Vandeleur. I can take my departure as well as the best of them."

The professor drew himself up with all the dignity in the world, quietly dropped his arms behind his back, crossing them under his coat-tails, and turned upon his heel.

His manner was worth the study, and the finger lingered a moment on the trigger while the outlaws glared at the *rara avis* that was so coolly defiant.

Then there was a short, sharp, double report, two cracks almost blending into one, followed by the sound of a well-known voice cutting the afternoon air:

"We Wailo allee lounde samey use'l, fu'st chop ebley time. Shoot allee samee 'Melican man, way uppee. Hi-yah!"

And We Wailo showed himself on the crown of the bank along the entrance to the glade, a revolver in either hand, while stiffening in sudden death lay the two outlaws, a bullet in the brain of each.

Miss Vandeleur was startled by the sudden report, and shocked by the fall of the men; but beyond all her face showed surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" she said, going over to Elderberry, turning him around and looking him square in the face.

"Who fired those shots?"

"What shots, aw?" drawled the professor.

"Nonsense. Do not think to hoodwink me longer. There is something strange about all this. I want to know who killed those men."

"Are they dead?"

He stared curiously at the motionless bodies, peering from under his spectacles, but not offering to advance.

While she looked We Wailo came skipping into view, flourishing his revolvers.

"Ah," said Elderberry, "there is the man probably. Ask him."

"Fool me no longer. This is not the first time. He takes the credit and some one else does the work. Are you afraid to father it?"

"What do you mean, aw? I turned my back on the scoundrels and, aw, left them to do their worst. I did not know, aw, that I had the means at my command, aw, to make an electrical display. If they were not shot perhaps they were, aw, struck dead fer lying."

"'Melican gil battee no mo'ah chin-chin. We Wailo lounde now; follee him come out first chop, c'hoi. Lettee Goggley Gawge do owney talk-talk. No good stay heah."

The Chinaman was more than usually in earnest, and his advice was worth taking. In his round-about pidgin-English way he explained that he had discovered the abduction of the pair and had followed as well as he could, arriving on the carpet just in time. He was sure he could lead the way back to Bunco, which was a number of miles below them; and he was confident that if they could reach it before dark there would be little danger of falling in with the outlaws, unless there were others on guard besides the two at whom he gave his thumb a significant jerk.

The conversation did not last as long as it takes to write its outlines. Without hesitation they left the spot, We Wailo acting as guide.

Seeing that Millie gave a troubled look at the bodies, the professor waved his hand with a motion that meant disgust.

"Give them no second thought, Miss Vandeleur. Their comrades, aw, will no doubt find them and provide for their disposal, aw. I would sooner they should find them than us."

That was so plainly true that the girl hesitated no longer.

Neither of the defunct road-agents answered to the appearance of Dandy Dave; and that fact was rather a satisfaction to Miss Millie, since she believed he was inclined to befriend her if he had the chance, and might not be so keen to intercept the fugitives. Unless he had been called away on duty it seemed hardly possible that he missed hearing the shots that had been fired, and if he was really desirous of preventing her escape, he would have put in an appearance before this.

But moments passed, they won their way rapidly downward, and still no one barred their progress.

Darkness began to close in, but at no great distance glimmered the first lights for the evening. Bunco was hardly a rifle-shot away.

It seemed strange that they had met no one. The two or three cabins that they passed were deserted. Several times they had halted to rest, and then scarcely looked behind them, so fearless now were they of any pursuit.

They made a last halt, and gazed Bunco-ward. Miss Vandeleur, who had scarcely been able to drag one foot after another, brightened.

"We are nearing safety, and I feel as though I could draw a long breath. One or the other, or both of you, deserve my thanks for either courage or skill. Perhaps by daylight I will see more clearly. You have stood my friends when I needed friends most, and I shall not forget you, since to-morrow I must be in Bunco."

Miss Vandeleur looked from one to the other as if trying to decide which was worthy of her warmest thanks; and with her words lingering on her lips there rose at her back a harsh, mocking snort of laughter.

"Ha, ha! Hands up thar, an' fingers empty—you! I hev yer foul. You could take in them poor shotes; but, Dandy Dave's around now, an' he's a-talkin'. You h'ar him?"

They did hear him. Miss Vandeleur's nerves must have been all broken up, since, at the sound of that voice she sunk silently to the ground.

Stranger yet was its effect on the others.

We Wailo uttered a shriek and sprang away—Professor Elderberry moving a second or so later, but keeping up the same headlong gait. They did not stop to listen or to fight; but without ceremony went at once, their speed accelerated by a couple of pistol bullets that went singing past, too close to be comfortable, though in the darkness, it would take fine shooting to hit a mark the bigness, even, of a man.

"Sorry fur ye, little woman," said Dandy Dave, as he raised Miss Vandeleur from the ground. "Them fellers ain't wu'th shucks on a pinch, an' you'll hev ter consider yerself a prisoner ag'in."

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLUMB CENTER PETE DROPS.

BUNCO was a very nice place when everything was going on well, and fate was stroking its fur the right way.

But Bunco, under a cloud, with half a dozen prominent citizens ready, or almost ready, to go under the sod, was an entirely different sort of town. If he had not already taken it pretty well in, Professor Elderberry would have thought twice before he recognized it as the sure enough article after his return from the puzzling, but involuntary journey into the mountains.

Enough had happened to stir up all the bile in the inhabitants.

The first thing that the professor really noted was a heap of smoking ruins where once stood the building known as the Hall of Hazard.

The riot of the night before had culminated in a conflagration.

As an informal sort of coroner's jury was viewing the remains of three or four men, all of whom had "died with their boots on," and bullets in their brains, George Elderberry's ad-

vent excited no attention, and he had an opportunity to learn what was the state of affairs, without asking any questions that might bring him into prominence.

It looked very much as though there was going to be civil war. Buck Beans and several of his men were in a heap of trouble, and no mistake, for Charley Cole had been killed, and his death lay, or was supposed to lay at the door of the party from the Bunker Hill Mine.

Cole was a popular man, and at his fall there rose a yell for vengeance that was caught up by Plumb Center Pete, who came rushing in from the scene of his difficulty with the supposed Tenderfoot Tom. Through the drifting, thickening smoke he fired twice, and each bullet found a mark. Then half a dozen men sprung to his side, and he led them on in a straight-forward charge.

"Go fur Beans! Whar i- he? Cuss ther rascal, he's slipped out! Ah, thar they go! Pump ther lead inter 'em, posie, yer can't go wrong. They've downed Charley Cole an' robbed ther bank!"

Blockey's cry was taken up by his followers, but there was little time given them for action. Buck Beans was something of a general, and he saw that he was in a tight place. A regular set was being made against him and his men, and if he remained there the result would be a general massacre. His gang was under fair discipline, but it was no part of his policy to kill at large for the sake of killing, and mixed up as they were with the regular *habitués* of the place, they could not pick their actual foes from those who were at the least indifferent.

At a signal, his men gathered around him, just as Plumb Center Pete's had done; but when Blockey charged, Beans was in full retreat.

Out from the Hall of Hazard they burst in a compact little mass, clear ahead of the rush, and went up the street in a swarm. If nothing had interfered, they would have found their way to the Bunker Hill in a very brief time.

But an interruption they were fated to meet, for not a hundred yards away they were confronted by a ringing call to halt, and with it came a shower of pistol-bullets from an unexpected foe that threw itself right in their path.

A man at Buck Bean's shoulder went down, while two or three fell back wounded. This new enemy hit hard and shot very straight. If it had been daylight, Hunter Browne would have made a little fortune the next pay-day. Meantime, Plumb Center Pete and his crowd were coming up from the rear, firing as they came.

Buck Beans saw the danger, and without hesitation, took his own way to meet it. Catching up the fallen man, with an encouraging yell he turned squarely to one side, and flung himself at the door of the nearest house.

In the party burst, and in an instant were at bay, just as a dull explosion, and after that a rapidly growing flame, told that something had gone wrong at Hazard Hall.

Although his party was so largely outnumbered, Buck Beans now had the advantage of position, and when one reckless charge had frittered away before his steady fire, the people of Bunco sat down just outside of easy pistol-shot distance, and Beans found out that he was surrounded and in for a siege. If Hunter Browne expected any of his friends to aid him at the Bunker Hill shaft he was certainly doomed to disappointment, for none of them were willing to march out to face certain death.

Neither side weakened. There was an occasional exchange of shots, but no great damage done. Bunco yelled to those in the house to come out and be hung; while those in the house shod that they had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

So, hour after hour, the siege lasted. Not so many men were on guard and there was a frequent change, but the discharge of a pistol would have been sufficient to bring the town there.

That was the situation when Professor Elderberry nervously stepped into the Jefferson House, after making a few inquiries and obtaining a hasty sketch of affairs as he came along.

The landlord received him, and evidently with some surprise.

"Hello! I'll sw'ar ef it ain't ther perffessor, in specks, turned up ag'in. There's bin weepin' 'bout you, Mr. Elderberry. Some sed ez how you'd bin token in at ther row at Hazard Hall; an' some sed you an' Hunt Browne hed chartered a charyut an' gone ter glory tergether; but I sed yer would kim back safe. A real gent never skips his board bill, an' I knowed yer wouldn't leave tell yer hed settled all 'counts. Ain't thet solid?"

Jefferson spoke heartily, and thumped Elderberry on the back with a familiar greeting that might have endeared him to a mule, but made the professor wince.

Then the latter looked around cautiously and said in a low voice:

"I, aw, got away from that den of thieves as rapidly, aw, as I knew how, and would, aw, have been safe here with you, aw, if I had not met with a most extraordinary adventure, which, aw, I will only tell to you privately."

when, aw, I ask your advice. But, aw, do tell me, has anything happened to Mr. Browne?"

"Happened? I dunno; stranger, how you'd call it, but it's the general belief he's passed in. D'yer mean ter say yer didn't know ner hear nothin' 'bout it."

The professor adjusted his glasses nervously, and answered that he had heard nothing in regard to his employer for the last twenty hours or so, and asked for further particulars.

"It's a long story when yer spread it out thick, an' I'll only chip off the corners a leetle. Brown come in hyar with the rush nigh twenty year ago. He picked up an ole side pard as were booked fur kingdom come, an' side pard made er will, leavin' his youngsters everythin' he had an' makin' Browne the'r guardeen."

"Browne, he took it all in, deescoveries an' all. Bunco seen some rough times arter that till this last boom come on, an' Hunt drifted away several times, but allers come back. Now, the kids hez both disappeared an' Hunt Browne gobbled everything in, meanin' ter make a stake wuth talkin' about."

"Excuse me, ah, but I don't see who has a better right to it."

"But that's the'r p'int. I dunno whether Pereira's b'in layin' fur him all along, er ef he's on'y jest teched bottom; but he's found out ez Browne war wiped out las' night at the Hazard Hall row, an' that Browne war a runaway husband ov his sister."

"When Browne turned up missin' he went fur ther widder's rights on sight; he jumped th'r Bunker Hill an's holdin' it now tooth an' nail. To-morrer the'r case comes up afore Judge Bradley, ez war one ov the'r 'riginal settlers too."

"The'r Bunker Hill gang gittin' inter trouble hyer kinder kept them outen the'r mix, an' it's s'prisin' how few keers ter interfere, now the'r camp thinks Browne's gone under. There's bin a few ov perspectin' round, but thar wa'n't a man ez wanted ter shove into the'r biz when he wa'n't 'round ter lead 'em. That's one side ov the'r story anyhow. Mebbe there's a dozen more."

"Aw, the cowards! Hunter Browne is not dead. When, aw, he comes back, he will make them fly."

"Don't be too sure. There's a gang up thar hard ter handle. It would take an army, don't yer see, an' one man er so ain't no business thar."

"I have," responded Elderberry sternly.

"Mr. Browne, aw, employed me to look after his interests, and in his absence, aw, I would be no man, if I did not do it. When the law does not act it is time, aw, for honest men to take hold. Can you lend me a pistol, aw?"

At the earnest question George Washington Jefferson laughed.

"You bet—half er dozen. But be yer sure yer know which end are which? With Big Frank at one end an' you at t'other I'd give high odds that you'd drop, even if yer hed the'r hammer drawn. Hyar yer be, an' don't yer fool yerself thet she ain't loaded."

With an oily chuckle the landlord extended a revolver of respectable dimensions, which Professor Elderberry grasped firmly, if awkwardly, by the stock, and then wheeled suddenly and stood face to face with Plumb Center Pete, who appeared in the opposite doorway.

"Drop that!" exclaimed Blockey, sternly, and even as he spoke his hand shot out, garnished with a ready revolver.

"No foolin', Goggle Jawge. What ner thunder yer doin' hyer! You try any tricks on me, an' I'll mount yer high. Sabbe?"

The position was full of danger, since Plumb Center Pete not only had the drop, but his pistol was a self-cocking one, and the hammer was raised by the pressure of the steady finger almost to the last notch.

The professor had a revolver in his hand to be sure, but the muzzle was down, and the best of experts could hardly have raised it without giving Blockey a chance to fire twice.

The professor did not attempt it, and though he evidently made a desperate effort to retain his coolness, there was a perceptible quaver in his voice as he spoke.

"Excuse me, ah, Mr. Blockey, but I meant, ah, nothing personal in regard to you. I came here and found my friend, Mr. Browne, had disappeared. I was, ah, just saying that, ah, I would hunt for him."

"You came hyer. That's jest it. What I'm sayin' are, how in blazes did yer git hyer?"

"I declare," answered Elderberry, quaveringly, at the fiercely-put question, "I—I don't know, ah."

"Of course yer don't. Yer orter be out at the'r shanty with the'r gang. Ef I hear ov yer doin' any more blowin' round hyer I'll lift the'r hull top ov yer skull off. Now jest lay that six on the'r bar, take yer night-cap, an' paddle off ter bed, till the'r boys sez what's ter be did with yer. I reckon they'll tell yer ter leave in the'r mornin'."

"I obey, aw, under protest," responded Elderberry, hastily. "Mr. Jefferson, here, aw, is your weapon."

Jefferson had watched the interview with interest after he had stepped a slight distance out

of range. He knew nothing of what had occurred in the mountains, but he saw that for some reason Blockey was willing to pick a disturbance, and he saw, too, that the eyes of the sport said "shoot."

He stood scarcely a pace from Elderberry's shoulder, and the latter turned and handed him back the weapon without a word, in spite of the jarring laugh of three or four spectators who stood near, and the grins of as many more. They felt little fear that Plumb Center Pete would miss his mark, and hit them.

And just at the moment there was a loud report, and Plumb Center Pete went down like lead, while a strong smell of gunpowder pervaded the room. There was neither flash nor smoke-burst to indicate the hand that had fired the shot, though the report seemed to come from the little group that stood near to George Washington Jefferson.

Professor Elderberry gave a howl, and snatched back the weapon.

"They're going to kill me, aw!" he shouted. "They're going to kill me! Stop them! Stop them!"

Then as the crowd rushed toward the fallen man, he darted out of the rear door at the end of the bar, brandishing the revolver as he went.

"Plumb Center Pete all bloke uppe," exclaimed We Wailo, as he skipped in from the door by which the Professor had left, and pranced toward Blockey. "Wautche collonel mutchee bad. Who hittee him?"

The question was easier asked than answered. As We Wailo had just entered, and the two doors were not in line at all, it was pretty certain that he was not the culprit, though any one else there was liable to suspicion.

"Mayzwell kallee him off an' belly him. Passee in him check—hi-yah! No undestande. Him bettlee ten dead man—looksee bettlee, neap, 'way uppe. Look out!"

The Chinaman had been more practical than the rest, since he had quickly stooped down and raised the head of the fallen man from the floor. It was for this reason that he, first of all, became acquainted with the astonishing fact that Plumb Center Pete was not dead after all.

"That's Derringer Deck's work, I'll bet a ton!" said a harsh voice. "He'd always sooner crease a man than kill him. Whar is he?"

The crowd looked curiously around, but could see no unfamiliar face, while if Derringer Deck was present he gave no answer.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PEREIRA'S STRANGE PARD.

BUNCO was more than half inclined to believe that Hunter Browne had passed in his checks, either in the rog at Hazard Hall or at the time the Bunker Hill property was jumped.

Under other circumstances there might have been more questions on the subject; but with the riot in town, and the received opinion that those who were interested in the affair at the mine had certain legal rights that would be clearly shown at the legal investigation promised at an early date, the better part of the citizens maintained a masterly inactivity, waiting to see what was to come of it, and turning a credulous ear to all sorts of flying rumors, of which there were plenty.

The town was livelier than it had been for a long time, and the end was not by any means yet.

For such reasons as these Professor Elderberry was likely to have a monopoly in any efforts to be made to assist Hunter Browne, and his sudden exit from the Jefferson House was not likely to exalt the opinion of what he might effect, though he was not as scared as he looked.

No one offered to pursue, and he did not seem to anticipate any trouble of that kind or care much if it came. He stuck the revolver away somehow under his waistband, and his spectacles in his vest pocket. Then he glanced in each of three directions—the Bunker Hill shaft, the Jefferson House, and the shanty where Buck Beans and his gang were still imprisoned.

It struck him that Beans was in no great danger there. So long as he kept away from the Bunker Hill there were some men that would not interfere, and Elderberry guessed that fact as wisely as if he had been on the inside of the ring.

Yet, if he seemed to hesitate in which direction to turn, it was because he was uncertain whether he could do Browne the most good by going directly to the Bunker Hill or by first trying what could be done for Beans.

It was fortunate that he lingered.

A man came slouching toward him in the darkness; and he recognized in the skulker Tenderfoot Tom.

Bowers would have gone by without a word if he had been allowed the opportunity; but just as he was passing, with a furtive glance over his shoulder Elderberry held up his hand.

"Is that you, aw, Thomas? If so, hold on."

The tone was a little more emphatic than usual, but it was not hard to recognize.

Bowers halted on the instant.

"Bless yer soul, pefessor, is that you? I'm

all-fired glad ter see yer. Oh, I've hed an orful time sence you left. Whar yer bin?"

"Never mind, ah; I'm back now. Did you let on, aw, to a living soul of the change we had made?"

"Nary soul. I jest kept dark; an' you, kin bet yer stogies the'r ain't no sich swappin' names ag'in."

"It might have been worse for you if it had not, ah, been done. They carried me away, ah, thinking they had hold of you; but I dropped my top coat over a canyon, ah, and put on another pair of spectacles, and in the morning, ah, there was fun."

"Yer don't say. How did yer git away?"

"Never mind that part of it, ah. I did that's enough. And a pretty mess there is, here, ah. What has become of Mr. Browne?"

"Now yer' torkin'. Yer wouldn't think it, but I've got the'r thing on a string; an' I'll never tell. When I knowed yer hed gone off ter danger I got so wurked up I couldn't stan' it, an' started ter foller. keerful like."

"That way I hed a chance ter hear what war goin' on up at the'r Bunker Hill. I strikes back ter hunt up Browne, an' he thort I were you till he see'd better, an' when I told him 'bout the'r game they were settin' up on him, he jest knocked me down an' stomped on me, an' the'r ain't nobody but me ez hez heard whar he went to sence then."

"And where has he gone to, aw, and how, aw, do you happen to know?"

"Hist, there's a woman in the'r case. He's runned away from her, an' she's goin' ter bring him right down ter his milk. Don't yer furgit it. Pereira's in the'r mix, too; an' are runnin' half a dozen jobs fur all they're worth."

The professor had seemingly overlooked the contradiction; but he came back to it now.

"I thought, aw, you said you had not told any one of our exchange."

"No one but Browne, an' he don't count. Ez I war sayin', I overheard some things I told him; an' bein' round loose this evenin', with that dog-blasted, bonary cuss, Kale Carter, outen town, I hed a chance ter hear more. My ears are open, an' don't yer furgit it."

"Not very likely, aw. What was it you heard?"

"That Mexican cuss talkin' ter his two pards; an' by the'r livin' glory they war both women. I got 'em cooped up in a shanty hyer, right in town. He must be an orful bad man; but Pereira's stock are up ter-day, an' I ain't sayin' nothin' ag'in' him."

"Two women," said the professor thoughtfully. "That is strange. Who are they?"

"Not knowin' I can't say; but I kin show yer whar they hang out, ef ye'll take the'r resks, an' foller 'er leetle bit."

"To be sure I will, aw. Propel."

Tom Bowers moved off cautiously, and keeping a watchful eye on his surroundings. He seemed uncertain at times whether to go on or retreat, but at no time was he at a loss to find his way, and as no one appeared to hinder his progress in a short time, he had halted near the shanty of which he was in search.

"Thar ye be," he said, pointing it out. "Now, ef ye'r going any furdur, go; but I'm pullin' out. You'll find me at the Jefferson House when yer want me, an' I wouldn't advise yer ter want me much afore mornin'. I ain't one ov the'r old rounders, an' I haven't hed a squar' sleep fur a week. By-by."

"Odd sort of genius that," thought Professor Elderberry, looking after him with a shake of the head.

"It is just possible that he may be as big a fraud as the rest of us. If so, what is his game? I'll look after him when I'm done with the matter I have in hand. Now for Pereira's barem, watch-house, office, or whatever it may turn out to be. There's something there worth the knowing. If the Mexican does not drop to my good intentions, I think he will learn a little before I get through with him—and so will I. Perhaps this is only a waste of time. I will soon see."

The professor was as noiseless and stealthy as a panther, as he approached the building upon which he kept his eyes so curiously fixed.

It was a stout little shanty, its one window securely shuttered with slabs, and it was evident that the occupants did not intend to be taken by storm.

When Elderberry began his advance he had just assured himself that no one was watching. After that, unless it was by one of those chances against which no man can guard himself, there was little danger of his being observed. He took advantage of the shadows as well as the most experienced of Indian trailers could have done, and made his way to the point he desired to reach with rapid secrecy.

Once in the shade of the building itself, he paused and listened, looking keenly at the shutter.

A few faint lines of light crept out from chinks that by daylight would have been invisible, but within all was silent.

The professor lay at full length cogitating.

He hardly had expected to be much the wiser for this inspection, yet he had a strong desire to see the two women of whom Bowers had

spoken, and thought it possible that he might succeed. If he did not there would not be much time lost.

After waiting a few moments he made the circuit of the house, a thing not hard to do, since, though other buildings were near, this one stood by itself.

No one was moving, the neighboring houses being probably empty of occupants; and had it not been for the faint streaks of light he would have believed that this one was also.

Still hearing nothing he crawled closer; and immediately was rewarded.

The building was made of logs, and right where he approached it there was a place where the chinking had fallen out. Elderberry detected it at once, and by trying with his hand found that some articles of clothing hung against the aperture on the inside. As he gently gathered them in his hand, which he was able to put through the opening, a great eye of light appeared causing him to withdraw his hand quickly for fear it might be seen by some one at a distance, who might be watching the spot.

Although his eyes had as yet fallen upon no one he was confident that from this point of observation he could command the whole inside of the room; and now he waited to see what was to come next.

Something did come—so quietly that he had to drop to the ground suddenly and lie there without motion, and almost without breathing.

Some one had approached so near that had he stooped he could almost have touched the professor.

Round the house, once, went the man, in a furtive cat-like way, and then Elderberry heard the noise of a key turning in a lock and the new arrival entered the building, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Hast thou found him?" asked a voice that was feminine, though it had lost all the freshness of youth.

"Not yet; but be patient a little. *Caramba!* He cannot have flown away. Some traces must he have left, and these to-night will be found. No bloodhound closer to the trail can stick than Gomez, and the eyes of the others are not closed. Wait, little one, in patience. The end is not far off."

An indistinct murmur was the answer—words spoken so low that the listener could not catch their meaning. Doubtless they were a complaint, since Pereira—for the late comer was that individual himself—responded cheerfully:

"Not for so long have we trailed him to lose him now. Though he run like a hound we will overtake him, and then, sister mine, thou shalt work thine own sweet will on the man that has crazed thee. A day more; that is all that I ask of thee. Be patient one little twenty-four hours yet. To-morrow will all be settled, since no one is there here to take his part, and he dares not come for himself, even if he can. No outlet was there for him to escape; no chance is there for him to hold his own. When we own the mine, and the wealth that he has here, and thou hast drawn out his heart's blood, then wilt thou be satisfied?"

"Yes, then, then, then!"

Her voice went upward in its pitch, until it rose into a shrill scream.

A moment later the woman grew calmer, and she asked:

"To-morrow night, you will take me to him?"

"Yes," was Pereira's cold response. "To-morrow. Wait."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ELDERBERRY IS SURPRISED SEVERAL TIMES.

PROFESSOR ELDERBERRY smiled and shrugged his shoulders at the promise that was a threat as well.

"And what will I be doing?" he thought to himself.

"I have a certainty if I follow them up to-morrow night, for I'll strike Mr. Browne at the end of their trail. But I have an idea that black-faced Mexican knows where he is now, and may try to get his work in between now and then. I'll look around and see if I can't checkmate in this little game. I would like to see who he's talking to, however. It is worth the trying."

Very carefully Elderberry pushed aside the garments that obstructed his vision and peered in.

Pereira was there, and facing him was a female figure, rather undersized and clad in black.

More than that he could not see, since the face was in the shadow, the other occupant of the cabin, if there was one, being evidently so close to the wall against which he leaned as to be invisible.

While he was craning his neck around, in the effort to get a better view, Professor Elderberry met with a sudden surprise.

Some one silently but lightly dropped from the roof of the cabin to his side.

He was not at a loss, however. His left hand made a grasp on the instant, and closed on flesh and blood.

"Sh! Don't be fool fu'st chopee—We Wailo loundee ebley time."

It was none other than the ubiquitous Chinaman, who cringed under the gripe on his neck, but gave no sign of discomfiture.

Without a word of answer Professor Elderberry led him away.

When they had put a hundred yards between them and the spot Elderberry loosed his hold.

"See here, aw, for once you stand on your own merits. I wasn't on that house, and I'll admit that you were. Mebbe, aw, you are as big a fraud as I am, but what did you see there anyway?"

"We Wailo see glil in black, settee back, lookee likee cly. See othlee two allee both, samee as Goggly Gawge. You heah 'em, Chineeman no can tell betlee. Whatche wantee know?"

"You didn't, aw, shoot any road-agents; you didn't help Tenderfoot Tommy; you didn't, aw, throw Pereira out of the window; what I want to know is who are you? What is your game?"

"We Wailo no can tell what Goggly Gawge wantchee. Him no humbug; him on'y loundee ebley time, see Plofessler no get hu't."

"Who hired you, aw, to spy on me? You have followed me like a shadow, aw, and I begin to suspect aw—"

"That We Wailo lun away. Good nightee, Goggly Gawge. No hapuse you jist now. See you bymby, soon. Ha, ha!"

The latter part was shot back by the Chinaman, who had twisted himself out of Elderberry's loose grasp with marvellous rapidity and started away on a run. The professor heard the short laugh, and then We Wailo vanished in the darkness.

Elderberry made no attempt at pursuit. He walked away with his head down, and his arms crossed behind his back under his coat tails—evidently his favorite attitude when in danger or doubt. Just now he was thoughtful—perhaps too much so, or he might have noted a little more carefully whither he was going. Before he recognized his surroundings, he was within a couple of hundred yards of the shanty which was still occupied by Buck Beans and his men. He looked up with a start on hearing the low tones of a speaker who was not very far distant.

"This hyer's all dog-goned nonsense," remarked the unseen individual.

"Buck hes jest camped right down thar, an' he's goin' ter stay 'thout a small army watchin' ov him. Ef he's wanted, ther only way are ter bring him out; an' ef he ain't wanted, and ther ain't ter be no hangin' match, why, what's ther use ov half a dozen good men a-starvin'hyer. I'm tired."

"Oh, hush! Yer make me sick. It's a heap more safer outen range than in it, an' ez long ez we git paid fur suttin' hyer, I'm agreeable. By-an'-by, when ther frolic begins, you'll find that small army 'round; an' ye'll wish they'd stayed in winter-quarters. It's our biz ter keep them hyer till ther ole man comes; then you kin bet, ef ther's a show, I'm goin' ter slide outen range. Whist! I wouldn't wonder he's comin' now."

Sure enough, there was the noise of a steady footstep.

The professor had dropped quietly to the ground as soon as he halted. Now he partially raised up, looking keenly in the direction of the approaching man, who halted by the side of the videttes and spoke in unmistakably the voice of Plumb Center Pete.

"Are they thar yit, boyees?"

"You bet they're thar, boss."

"Keep a close eye on 'em. Ther boyees are all waitin' at Flamin' Fred's, an' when I git back an' give ther word, ther doors open ag'in, ther band strikes up, and ther circus begins over. They're all mixed through each other so ez a Philardelfy sharp couldn't tell t'other from which, an' I want ther Bunco men ter kerry all o' their end, an' ez much ov yourn ez yer kin unload onto 'em. This hyer is ter be a popular uprisin'; an' poor Charley are ter be ther pass-word fur ter-night."

"Eggsactly; but s'posen Bunco won't come."

"Git out. All I'm afeard are they'll git down ter solid work afore I git thar. It's ter keep 'em squar' ter ther rack that I want you fellers hyer. When they're straight on ther war-path, then 'light, an' git out to ther Bunker Hill 'thout foolin'. Thar's whar ther fun kims in. I begin ter b'lieve there's been a leetle mistake; but thar ain't no harm did yet, an' everything's goin' on wheels, 'cept ther money ain't pannin' out ez rapidly ez we hoped fur."

"I'm gittin' mine; thet's you're lookout," answered the man with a low laugh. "I tell yer, ef ther cash wasn't paid down, you'd see me scootin'."

"And you would see me shootin'. Ye'r in this till ther finish, an' don't yer furgit it. Eyes open, now, an' wait till yer hear me comin' back at ther head ov ther rush."

"We're hyer, I tell yer," answered the man, a little impatiently. "Don't keep us waitin' too long. That's all."

"All right. Work will begin soon. Pass the word along to ther rest."

Blockey departed in haste. He did not wait

to see whether his order was obeyed or not. If he had done so and been cautious he might have seen a third man rise from the ground shortly after the other two had set out. Professor Elderberry was making a commendable effort to see the matter through, and in the face of the late unpleasantness at the Jefferson House was taking more risks than most men would have been willing to run.

Flaming Fred's place, a shebang where red-hot fire-water was sold and a great deal of wickedness was concocted, was some little distance away—Bunco might have fairly been called the western city of magnificent distances. Plumb Center Pete had not got more than half-way there when he met a man coming toward him, who gave a low, peculiar whistle.

Blockey answered it promptly in kind and held out his hand.

"Hold on, Pete, there's bin suthin' like a fresh deal, an' Cap sez he must see yer quick. Ez he bez his heavy harness on he don't wanter promenade Bunco, an' you must kim out fur a minute while he gives yer ther points."

"Bosh!" answered Blockey, harshly, "I gi'n him all ther p'int. It's ther sand runnin' out thet's ther matter with him. Thar's holes in his boots, that's what ails him."

"Ef it is I ain't ther man ter tell him so; an' ef yer reely think it yer better gosay it yerself. There's extree coffins fur all ther kickers, an' ef yer don't want ter 'bey orders yer best plan are ter crawl right inter one."

"You tell me I'm afeard ov Kale Carter er any other two-legged man ov this hyer footstool? Blast yer I'll gi' it to him straight now an' see how he likes it. An' I wouldn't stop much ter drop you. Whar's he at?"

The messenger had managed to put Blockey in a tearing passion, and seemed to have some doubts about the propriety of having done so.

He answered a good deal more respectfully:

"Excuse me, Mr. Blockey. I know that's all right, an' I didn't mean ter make yer mad. You'll find ther captain waitin' close by. He sed he didn't want ter keep yer more ner a minnit."

While he spoke he led the way—and Professor Elderberry, who had been taking this all in, followed at a respectful distance, though somewhat in doubt, since at times he shook his head and looked as though he would like to utter his protest.

His judgment was not at fault. When they had got out of range of probable stragglers, while the guide was saying something in a low tone he suddenly threw his arms around Blockey's waist and uttered the same whistle that Elderberry had heard before, but louder.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FALL OF THE KNIFE.

AFTER all his gilt-edge reputation as pistol-shot and sport, Bunco knew very little about Pete Blockey. For that matter, the most of the towns where he flourished were in the same fix.

He was a drifter who had been among the camps almost from the time of Sutter. He knew a good deal about mines and mining, that was certain, and had positively been connected with some very good men.

No one at Bunco suspected him of having any dealings with road-agents and outlaws. Professor Elderberry had learned that much by a few carefully-worded questions, and then thought it expedient to hold his peace, even though he might expect a "circus" the next time they met.

Of course, the taking away of the man that had so lately threatened his life was interesting; that he should continue to follow, after having seen the development of Kale Carter's hand, may seem a matter of surprise; but he had his reasons—of which Plumb Center Pete might not have approved.

That worthy had been hit to stay.

Instant death was not what his assailants were after; but they meant to have no more nonsense, nor did they, since it was a good fifteen minutes before their captive recovered his senses and found himself bound hand and foot.

He peeped warily around through his half-opened eyes, being careful not to call attention to his reviving condition, and in an almost imperceptible way tugged at his bonds to see if they were tight beyond loosening.

The outlaw fingers had been skillful enough. He might have lain unmolested for a week and have been a good deal further off from escape than he then was. They carried him along with very little show of tenderness, and it required a good stock of nerve to stand a treatment that would have made most strong men groan with anguish. His arms were knotted together at the wrists, his ankles secured in the same way. A stout pole thrust between wrists and ankles was carried by four men, two at either end, and as he swayed there it was hard to believe that he could recover his wits, except to lose them again.

Nevertheless he did, and had just fairly identified his surroundings when the procession halted and he was thrown to the ground with a careless cruelty that was enough to rack every bone in his body.

"He's hard ter hurt," said one of the men, with a reckless laugh, "but ef it breaks a few bones it won't make a dif a biterence. I reckon he won't hev much use fer 'em after ter-night. Ther feller thet plays bugs on us, pards, are mighty apt ter find we git even in ther long run."

"You kin risk yer hull stake on that every time," responded one of the others, as he brutally jerked the pole away. "Wake up, Pete, wake up! Hyer's the capt'n an' all ther boys jest ready ter glory in yer spunk, when yer trots over ther divide, boots on an' nary a grunt."

So saying, he spurned the seemingly unconscious form with his foot.

Pete gave a low, gurgling gasp and moved feebly.

"All right; he's coming to. Send word to all hands. This thing wants ter be did ter-night. I'll bet he ain't half ez dead ez he seems."

"What yer goin' ter do?" gasped Blockey, in a scarcely audible whisper.

"Goin' ter show up yer gen'ral cussedness fu'st, an' hang yer fur it afterwards."

"Don't shout too loud, er yer mayn't hev breath enuf left ter spell a-b-l-e!" answered the captive with explosive harshness.

At the sudden return of strength, the man nearest him leaped back so quickly that there was a laugh at his expense from the others.

"Oh, I ain't dead yit," continued Blockey; "an' when yer git this thing down ter bed-rock somebody else'll be in my place, er I'll know ther reason why. There's white men in this gang, I'll still allow, an' somebody hez took 'em in. What I want ter know are, who he are an' what he sez I've bin a-doin'?"

"I am ther man that puts up ther charges against yer, an' I say you're a double-dyed traitor that has sold us out to Johnny Short—or would, if you had the chance to deliver yer goods. He ain't one of ther kind that pays in advance."

"It's a lie, Kale Carter! You've been settin' up a job while I war away. You an' yer bums hev drawn ther wool over ther eyes ov honest an' better men. Ef yer dar' give me a show an' fight it out, I'll prove it on yer head with knife, pistols er ther bar' hands."

"Not very likely we'd give yer ther chance now. You've got erway with enough men as it is. No one is sayin' thet yer don't know how ter use ther tools as well as any man here; but when you begin to use them on us, it's time that you retired. There's them ez sez you went the pure quill in ther stage racket. Where's Dandy Dave an' his two pards that we gave you to run your little game with at Castle Mystery?"

As well as he might, Plumb Center Pete shrugged his shoulders at the question.

"Thet's ther conunderum. When I war thar they was safe enough. Ef a gal ez big ez yer fist, an' a half-baked idiot, could git away from 'em, they ain't wuth ther salt!"

"Thet's it. They couldn't get away unless some one hed helped them. You was thar, an' no one else. Pete Blockey, you sold us out!"

"Bring in ther bodies."

Blockey could not at once frame an answer.

Of course he knew that an escape of some kind had been engineered the moment he caught a glimpse of Professor Elderberry at the Jefferson House. He had attempted to scare the professor into silence, but he had not as yet had time to follow the thing up and discover just what had happened. If the Man in Spectacles had got away with Dandy Dave and his two assistants, then Goggle George was a good deal better than any one had given him credit for being.

While Pete cogitated four men stepped out of the shadows, each pair bearing a body.

"Thar are Tucson Tom, an' his brain-box kerries a hole in it jest ther same size ez ther derringer of Plumb Center Pete."

So said the spokesman on one side of the quartette.

"An' hyar's Bad Mike. About him I says: Ditto."

"Plumb Center Pete, what have you to say?" asked Kale Carter, as the bodies were laid down close to, and in plain view of, the bound man.

"I say, whar's Dandy Dave? Ef this are all yer hev ter say I kin give it ter ye straight ez a string. Ther gal bribed him; he's turned ther prisoner loose, an' are off with a good heap of stamps."

"You lie, Pete, you know you do. No one but you knew where they were confined; no footsteps but yours point toward the spot, and you all came away together. Pete, you've sold us out, and you'll have to die."

"Ye'r pilin' up a heap er words, but yer ain't provin' a cent's wuth. While ye'r foolin' hyer with me things are jest goin' wild at Bunco, an' you're counted out ov ther racket whar, maybe, there'll be more slugs than glorv."

"Proof, is it, thet yer want? Hyer yer hev it."

"We've sed thet your steps pointed thar; an' none other. Thet's something, but not the most. Hyer are two derringers that you can't deny are yours. They were found empty near the spot where the two bodies lay. What's ther use talkin'?"

Blockey's mouth closed with a snap at the sight of the derringers. He recognized the weapons on the instant.

"Nothin' ter say ter that, hev yer?"

"Say! What's ther use er sayin'? Do I look like ther man ter be throwin' such tools ez them around?—ther best I ever looked over? In course they're mine, an' ef you'll find ther man ez stole 'em you'll know who shot Tucson Tom an' Bad Mike."

He spoke with a confidence that he did not feel, and the harsh laugh that went around the circle told that his explanation was not believed.

"Thet's too thin, Pete; a good deal too thin. They're men yer hed a grudge at, an' men yer couldn't buy. Mebbe Dandy Dave hesn't passed in, an' mebbe he's in cahoots with yer; an' ef so it's dead open an' shut you've both sold out ter Johnny Short. It's a pity, Pete, fur yer hev yer good p'int; but in course we hed it all down fine afore we brung yer hyer. Now my vote sez yer got ter die."

"An' mine."

"An' mine."

So the word ran around the circle, voice after voice taking up the refrain.

Of all the hardened, desperate-looking men there, not one gave him a relenting glance. Evidently they believed him guilty of the treachery charged, or worse; and in such a case they would have no mercy.

Bound as he was Blockey managed to straighten himself up. He could stand, and that seemed to be all.

He gave a cold glance around.

"You've tired ov a boss thet gives yer all money an' no murder; an' fur fear he might squeal ef yer turn him loose yer want ter settle him. It's Kale Carter's work, an' let Kale Carter finish ther job. I'll bet yer he ain't got ther nerve ter settle a man. You've got a knife thar, Kale; use it ef yer dare."

He put all the sneering emphasis possible into his tones, and looked Kale Carter who stood just fronting him, full in the face. More than likely was it that Blockey had hit the truth for there could be no doubt about the hate in the eyes of the other, who did not hesitate an instant but tore out his knife.

"We'll see who has nerve, Pete Blockey. Take that."

The knife glistened even in the semi-darkness. It rose and fell.

CHAPTER XXX.

PETE BLOCKEY TAKES A NEW SIDE PARD.

THE fall of Kale Carter's knife was followed by a succession of surprises.

With marvelous coolness and quickness Blockey threw his hands up so that the blade passed between his wrists. If it cut his hands it cut, as well, the cord that he was straining almost to bursting.

Then Plumb Center Pete fairly fell upon Carter, and ground him down to earth, snatching from his yielding fingers the knife, and a pistol from the convenient belt.

A second later Blockey's limbs were entirely free, and the rattle of fire-arms had commenced.

Just as fast as thumb and finger could work, two or three shots were fired; and not one of them was altogether wasted.

So unexpected was the movement that not one of the outlaws had a weapon out, and if they had been almost any other sort of men there would have been a panic.

They were used to bullets though, and had been trained to act, until to draw and fire was almost mechanical. Quick as Blockey was there came an answering volley that swept the ground, and should have annihilated him, as it would have done if he had only been there.

But he knew the power of the men to stay, and just in time had given a backward spring, and then darted behind a boulder.

As he disappeared a sharp voice from some one ensconced behind a neighboring rock, rung out:

"Hold on, there! Take water or bite dirt! We've got you in a box, and mean business! Hands up!"

The last words were punctuated by the crack of a pistol and an outlaw dropped motionless at Plumb Center Pete's back, his revolver being harmlessly discharged as he fell. He was a man who had been left on outpost duty, and had slipped back so quietly that Blockey had no notice of his approach, and would have been taken from the rear in another moment.

At sound of the shot and the strange voice the outlaws took to cover with a rapidity that showed they were not altogether reckless of danger.

"I reckon we've got yer now," sung out Pete, as he peeped warily over the rock that protected his front.

"Me an' my pard, hyer, are in town, all dressed up; an' ef we leave a bull scalp in this outfit, yer kin call me a bloody liar. Hoo! Wake snakes! we're comin'!"

Immediately after this howled threat, Blockey, as quiet as a mouse, slipped backward a dozen feet, threw himself over a ledge, dropping

ten feet, without noise or injury, and then started on a run down the mountain-side.

He had not gone a dozen steps when he heard a low, "Hist!"

The man who had chipped in to back his game was still with him.

At last, as he wheeled at the sound, pistol in hand, a dark figure dodged behind a tree without offering a shot at the inviting back only a few yards in front.

"Don't be a fool, aw, Peter. By this time, aw, you ought to know that I can shoot; and I've got you foul if I want your meat."

"Goggle Jawge ag'in! All right! If yer want ter pard in, fur this night only, I'm yer man. But I'd ez soon fight ez eat, an' I'm only goin' ter fire an' fall back."

"Honest Injun, aw?"

"Honest it are! You helped me through ther drag, an' now ye'll find me squar'. Kim on! Ther hornets'll be buzzin' round lively soon ez they take stock o' damages, an' we ain't got time ter tarry."

Without the least hesitation Professor Elderberry sprung out from behind his tree.

"Agitate your extremities, aw! You'll find me with you in a foot-race till we can get where the advantage, aw, is not all on the other side."

"You've bin hyer afore?" said Blockey, as shoulder to shoulder, they hurried down the narrow trail.

"It is so reported, aw. If you don't believe it follow and see."

"Ef yer know the short-cuts better ner I do peel 'em off. Them ole side-pards ov mine are playin' fur keeps."

"Come!"

With the one word the professor darted to the side. Without protest or hesitation Blockey followed.

"Durned ef this don't beat cock-fightin'," the latter said, after a few moments of silence.

"Who'd 'a' thunk thar war a short-cut like that? Why, blamed ef it ain't a mile 'round. I don't give shucks fur ther chances ter ketch up now."

"I wouldn't give, aw, shucks for them if they did," responded Elderberry. "Now, aw, what I want to know is, where is Colonel Browne?"

"It can't hurt yer ter know, young man. I reckon you'll find him in ther Bunker Hill shaft, ef yer must know it. Thet's what we figgered outen it."

"Dead or alive, aw?"

"All alive, ef he hain't starved ter death. Bet yer sweet life that gang don't know he's thar. He's layin' low, waitin' fur Beans ter jine him."

"But, how did he get there?"

"I kin show yer, ef yer think it'll do any good. Now it's my turn: Whar's ther gal?"

"I left her in charge, aw, of Dandy Dave. He was shooting at the time, aw, and I did not wait to inquire what he intended doing next."

"You git out! You ain't foolin' me no more. My leetle racket's busted, but I ain't playin' inter your hands unless I kin see my way ter a divy. Fingers on ther table now. What's ther game? Dry up on that drawl, and give it to me straight."

"Straight it is, aw. I am backing Hunter Browne's cards; and I want to make the others show ther hands, all 'round."

"An' how about ther leetle woman—Millie? Strikes me yer bin a-lookin' that way purty sharp. Eh? What's she to you?"

"I couldn't tell you, for sure, aw; but I sometimes think, aw, that she is—my sister."

"Well, dog my cats ef that ain't a sockdolager! Why, consarn it, I thought he was ther other feller. I'd laid that up fur Tenderfoot Tommy, ef he didn't turn out ter be Johnny Short. Old Allbright sed so, an' I war half beginnin' ter believe it."

"And Allbright and you, aw, were in partnership?"

"Partly, partly. May ez well blow ther game, ez ther chances now are nixey."

"This Millie had ther ole man in tow as kinder her agent. Ther ole man got me ter take hold ov ther string ter easy things out his way, but he left me half in ther dark. I took in pards north, south, east an' west. If we'd got hold we'd 'a' kept; an' ef Kale Carter hedn't been a fool, we'd 'a' caught on, spite ov Pereira. To-morrer ther gal would 'a' proved who she are, an' ez we'd 'a' hed things our way I don't jest guess thar would 'a' bin strength enough in all Bunco ter turn us out. An' we wouldn't 'a' went until we hed our share, either."

"I guess not," remarked Elderberry sarcastically. "Now, who killed Allbright? Was that some of Kale Carter's work?"

"I'll never tell; Kale thort he was playin' a double game, but if it were a guessing-match I'd put my stamps on the little Mexican fur ther job."

"What, Pereira?"

"Ther same. He's ther fly in ther 'pothecary's' intment, but I ain't got down ter ther depths ov his wickedness yit. Allbright hed a will an' some papers. Oh, I'll own up, Pereira hez always kept one day ahead."

"It's not necessary, Pete, it's not necessary to know more. What, aw, do you propose to do?"

"Skip by ther light ov ther moonlight, pard; skip by ther light ov ther moon. With Kale Carter's back up, an' you an' ther gal fly ter ther facts about Captain Trouble. I don't think it's healthy hyer."

"Don't be a fool, aw. Better go to get even. If Kale Carter is not dead he won't hurt you much, and we can be deaf and dumb. I need your help badly, aw, for I've got the contract to clean out the Bunker Hill to night. Things are not as I thought they were, and, aw, I must set them up on the other alley."

"I'm with yer. It'll jest snatch Pereira bald-headed when we come down ter work. Hyer's with yer. Make yer game, gentlemen, while ther hall's rollin'."

"And play it mighty careful, aw. I suspect—I barely suspect—that we'll find Millie there, and maybe in trouble."

"Heavens an' earth! Yer don't say so! Why, pard, ef she be the game's all broke up. Ef Pereira gits ther chance he'll make cold meat ov her an' Browne, all both, an' swing out fur ther hull stakes. Ef she went thar—she's jest a dead gal."

Blockey's tone was low and earnest, and he turned hastily, as if he was anxious to instantly settle the doubt.

"It is, aw, dreadful to contemplate, but, aw, Peter, she went. I sent her with Dandy Dave to keep her out of Pereira's hands."

CHAPTER XXXI.

MILLIE VANDELEUR STRIKES A DEN OF WOLVES.

To be so unexpectedly wrecked when just in sight of port was more than Millie Vandeleur could stand. The unaccountable cowardice of Professor Elderberry in running away without even venturing one shot gave her, moreover, a shock hard to stand. Somehow she had had confidence in him in spite of herself, and here she found at the first real test that he was worse than worthless.

Dandy Dave found that he had a fainting girl on his hands.

He looked at her curiously, and shook his head with a gesture of dissatisfaction.

"Hyer's yer gal with nerve, played out ez bad ez ther wu'st ov 'em," he said to himself. "She'll be 'round all right, an' listenin' ter reason, afore long; but that ain't doin' no good jest now. Dandy Dave, yer in a ticklish persish, an' yer five hundred dollars—ef yer git it—won't be apt ter give yer much comfort ef yer once strike Kale Carter an' ther boys. Ther's a blessin', though. Ef she won't come ter terms there's some one else ez will. She seems ter be bracin' up a bit. L't's try what we kin do anyhow."

He had placed Miss Millie in a leaning posture against a tree; when she recovered a moiety of her strength and resolution he was standing just in front of her, eying her with the same not altogether unfriendly look that she had already noticed.

"Don't be too much skeered, miss," he said, with a cheerful grin.

"I don't want ter hurt yer onless I hev ter; an' ef yer got half ther sense I think yer hev, you an' me kin come ter terms 'bout much time in ther dicker. Yer see, I'm a sufferin' orphan, an' a fit subjick fur charity; on that line about how big are ther size ov yer ante?"

"I do not understand you," was the response, given with returning vigor.

"What do you expect to gain by this treatment?"

"That depends on what yer think yer life's wu'th."

"What, would you kill me?"

"Not er bit ov it—onless yer force me ter do it. I want ter save yer life; ef it's wu'th ther savin'. In course I can't go round reeskin' mine fur nuthin'; an' it wouldn't be noways safe ter let yer go 'bout some sorter a guarantee. Now, what's it wu'th? Put up er shut up."

"I believe you want to bargain with me for my life—"

"Fur ther savin' ov it, miss. Fact are it ain't altogether safe fur even me ter crawl inter Bunco, an' fur you it's certain death."

"I do not understand. If you have any fears turn me loose and allow me to run my own chances. But I will give you five hundred dollars if you will take me to the Jefferson House, where's all the little money I have in the world."

"Can't be did, miss. Ther five hundred would be jest about the price ov a through ticket in that direction, but I hope I may die ef yer life would be wu'th a penny afore mornin'. They're layin' fur ye—ther wonder are thet they hev'n't taken yer in afore this. They've tried it, one way er another, ain't they, miss?"

Millie was about to give an indignant disclaimer when she thought of the little scene in her own room, and her denial became a hesitating one at least.

"I kin see it in yer eyes, so don't yer say another word. Hunt Browne's ther only man thar you kin trust."

"Hunter Browne! Ah, he is my worst foe. If I succeed in what I expected it is he that I will strike. Hunter Browne, oh, if you are a friend of that man it is no use to ask further. He it is who has planned this double outrage.

He would drive me away by fraud or force. If he cannot do that he would not stop to kill me. I would not be the first of his victims, if report is true."

"Yer needn't be givin' yer hand away, miss; and if ye'r takin' ther kurnel fur anything but a real squar' man yer off yer eggs bad. Take my advice, miss. Don't say much ter me, but j-st show him yer keards an' ax him how ter play 'em. See ef he don't tell yer right every time. He's a man frum ther ground up, an' I'll swear to it."

If the words of Dandy Dave did not convince they called her more thoroughly to her senses and put her on her guard. She closed her lips on the words she was about to speak.

"Hyer, I'll give it to yer straight. It's your life an' mine ter try ter go inter Bunco ter-nigat—though to morrer it may be different. Ef you've got that five hundred ter spare I'll trust yer fur it till Hunt Browne's ready ter pay it. I'll take yer ter ther Bunker Hill, an' ef he ain't thar I'll send fur him, an' mebbe he kin tell yer a thing er two."

"And if I refuse?"

"Well, then, I guess ther best plan are ter take yer back whar yer come frum, an' see ef I can't make a better bargain frum thar."

"Enough," answered Millie, with a shiver.

"If I had not been disarmed, your victory would not have been so easily obtained. Lead on and I will follow you."

"Not that I'm a-doubtin' yer, but it 'pears ter me it would look more sociable like ef we went side by side; yer needn't be afeard. Give me yer hand on ther five hundred an' we kin trust each other till the last horn blows."

Friend or foe, Dandy Dave did not for a moment take his eye off of the young lady, or give away the advantage that from the first he had possessed. He held out his hand now, and gave a solemn shake to the little fist that was placed hesitatingly in his, and then, in spite of Miss Vandeleur's tired feeling, hurried her away.

It was quite a time after, and with all the confidence in the world that he marched boldly up to the little cluster of huts that marked the location of Hunter Browne's mining venture. Not a doubt had he until too late, for he did not recognize the jumpers, even when totally surrounded. Then, before he could make a movement for defense, he was seized, his weapons taken from him, while a brutal laugh went up from the gang that had appeared at his summons.

"Browne? Browne don't live here now," was the cool explanation of Big Frank, who stepped forward. "Ther's a good little man named Pereira that'll be 'round after a bit, an' he kin tend to yer case a good bit better. We've sent fur him, an' when he comes we'll let yer know."

"Whatever may be the state of affairs here," said Miss Vandeleur, picking up a little of her courage once more, "you can have no object in detaining me. This man was guiding me here simply that Mr. Browne, who is a stranger to me except by sight, might aid me on my way to Bunco. I was separated from my friends and lost in these mountain paths. I have no money with me, but I will be prepared to amply reward any one that will guide me safely to town."

"Right you are, miss, ef we sabbe yer bog Latin, Pereira's ther man ez kin do that up ter nature, an' make a fair divy among us boys arterwards. You kin just wait till he comes. We've sent him word an' he's on ther way. Sorry ther furnitur' ain't arrived frum Paris, but you kin make out ter sot around somewhar, I guess. Don't try any foolishness, either. Ef yer does, you'll git left bad, woman er no woman. We're hyer ter stay."

Miss Millie looked around her, and thought that she had made a poor exchange. These men were even more desperate-looking than the outlaws from whom she had lately fled; and Professor Elderberry was not here to keep up her spirits. She felt the loss of his cool drawl, and she would have given her thousand dollars for the chance to exchange Dandy Dave for him. The latter, just now, in the language of the mines, was 'no good.' He understood only too well what had happened, and kept his face in the background with a persistence that argued a fear of an unpleasant recognition.

He who was spokesman of the party looked up at him keenly and at the same time made a slight motion with his hand.

A dark-faced Mexican touched Millie on the arm and led her away. As she went she heard Big Frank say in a low tone:

"It's Dandy Dave, boss-thief and road-agent. Take him out an' string up. Bunco 'll back that, you bet."

"Better wait till ther boss comes. He may kick if he misses ther fun. I'll swear I would."

The suggestion had its weight.

"Ye'r right es allers. Tie him up an' chuck him in ther caboose. They kin all go up ther flume together."

CHAPTER XXXII.

COLONEL JOHNSON ARRIVES.

As the outside world was not aware of the commotion at Bunco, travel continued thitherward all the same, and there was nothing to

prevent people that were on the way from arriving.

What might happen to them after they got there was a problem for them to face and find out.

The disappearance of Plumb Center Pete was not specially noticed, but the lynchers were halting without a leader, and public opinion was not half as ravenous against Buck Beans, and the men from the Bunker Hill Mine, now that Kale Carter's men had withdrawn to turn their attention elsewhere. Still there was enough of the old lava working to insure lively times if the crowd poured in much more benzine; and the town was not the most pleasant of places for a stranger to be set down in.

Slim Jack was away behind even his elastic schedule and was coming along with a roll. He had applied the braid quite freely for the last half dozen miles, but now, recognizing the home base at last his horses responded with a freedom he hardly expected and came rattling into Bunco at a great pace, the noise of the wheels drowning other noises that might have attracted his attention.

These other noises in turn probably killed the rattle of his wheels.

At any rate a man suddenly appeared, running with his head down and apparently for dear life.

He darted right into the path of Slim Jack's leaders, and though he recognized his danger and made a desperate effort to evade them the effort came too late.

The near leader struck him, flung him down in the middle of the road, and he lay like one bereft of sense in the midst of the trampling hoofs, for at the same moment the driver had thrown down his brake hard, and given a strong pull on the lines.

It was not altogether the danger to the man on the road either that caused him to act so promptly.

There was a pack in full cry just behind the fugitive, though it was a chorus of human throats that raised up the howl. There was also a shot or two flaring in the darkness, and Slim Jack stopped as quick for the mob that appeared an instant later as if it had been a gang of road-agents with the familiar "Hands up!"

"That's one of 'em!" shouted the mob.

"He's a cussed spy of Hunt Browne's."

"What's he doin' slinkin' round hyer? He's the man that started ther muss at Charley Cole's. Fit on a hemp necktie while we got him. Ther rest will keep. Hurrah! Hyer's fun at last."

So, from different throats the cries went up, and half a dozen of the more reckless ones actually threw themselves under the very heels of the horses in an effort to drag out the unfortunate that they were hounding.

To the surprise of all the intended victim was very much alive and in full possession of his senses. He eluded the hands that were clutching for him, sprung up in the midst of the horses, placed a hand on the back of either wheeler, and with a vigorous swing threw himself up on the foot-board.

"For goodness' sake, gentlemen!" he shouted, "hold on! It's only me, Tenderfoot Tom, ez they call me, ther Flat from Walnut Bar. I'm only out hyer waitin' fur Kunnel Johnson. I ain't nothin' ter do with Hunter Browne, an' I didn't raise no row. It's all a mistake!"

"Mistake er not, we want yer. Throw him down, Jack, er we'll hev ter drill yer."

The threat was re-enforced by the clicking of a pistol-lock, while one or two men began to climb up over the wheels.

"Up with your brake and drive on, or I'll blow you cold," uttered a grim voice in Slim Jack's ear.

This was something else. The order came short and solid, and Jack felt the hard muzzle of a revolver pressed against the base of his skull.

"Don't yer do it, boss," he answered, twisting his eyes around in an unsuccessful effort to look back over his shoulder.

"There's too many of 'em. I guess it's only a leetle fun now; but they're howlin' tigers when they git the'r dander riz, an' you an' me can't fight ther hull ov Bunco."

Jack knew to whom he was speaking.

He had two passengers inside and one behind him on top.

It was the latter that had just said his say.

Strengthened as the appeal was by the cold touch of the revolver, it might have proved ineffectual, for the driver knew well enough the temper of the mob around him; but at that moment Bowers took up the argument with his best hold of the whip. Come what might, he never dropped his most effective weapon; and once more it saved him in an emergency.

Down it came with mightily stinging force, and as it fell Slim Jack's foot loosened the brake, and the team plunged forward.

"All right boys," shouted back the man on top, as the mob fell apart at the sudden rush.

"Go a little slow. We've got some calico inside, so just hold your horses. We'll go up to Jefferson's and dump them out. Then you and I can argue the matter about Tommy. I'll see you all later."

A howl that was as much of amusement as of anger, was the answer, the coach rolled on with rather increasing speed, and the crowd trotted after, while Bowers, after one eager glance, shouted in happy tones:

"Bless my soul, hyer's richness. Hanged ef it ain't ther kunnel at last!"

"Right you are, my boy. For driving mules and getting into musses you beat the world. As usual, I'm just in time. What have you been up to now?"

"Me? I ain't bin doin' nothin'; jest lookin' 'round er leetle till yer got byer. But I sw'ar I thought you'd never come."

"Perhaps it would have been safer for me if I had staid away," said Johnson coldly, as he took the hand that was thrust at him.

"There will be a circus when the hearse stops; but I'll do the best I can. If we don't pull through it will be the first time."

"Oh! I ain't afeard. They'll listen ter reason when you spout it at 'em; but they don't care fer me any more than fer old shoes."

"Hello, what's that?"

Johnson looked over his shoulder at the sound of a pistol-shot, well off to their rear, and was surprised to see the crowd in their wake suddenly halt, stare about, and then go ramping back.

Buck Beans, seeing the way clear, had made a sortie, and was on the high road to getting clean away.

The vehicle coming to a sudden stoppage at the Jefferson House, allowed Bowers's answer to be more plainly heard.

"There's war in town, an' I guess ther crowd's goin' ter drop me an' feel fur Buck Beans. Cuss 'em, I wish I'd never seen 'em."

"And who is Buck Beans, and what have you to do with his crowd?"

"He's Hunter Browne's right-hand man, an' somehow ther camp bez riz at 'em, though cussed ef I kin understand it. Oh, there's lots ov trouble hyer, an' when that goes, my luck gits me in ther thick ovit."

"Hunter Browne, ah!"

Colonel Johnson repeated the name aloud and thoughtfully as he climbed down.

Jefferson was already out, and looking after the interests of the inside passengers, who, as Johnson had stated, were of the feminine sex.

One was an elderly lady, clad in an old-fashioned, stuffy-looking dress and who held on to a grip-sack as though it was worth a pile of money.

"Bless my soul, landlord," she wheezed. "The town is worse now than when I was here the other time, and it was bad enough then. Where's my niece? She ought to be out here to meet me. Oh, dear, this is a horrible country!"

"Excuse me, madam, but I don't recollect you exactly, and I'm sure I don't know who your niece kin be. But come in. We kin make you comfortable, and to-morrow you can look around."

"Don't know me, don't know me? I suppose not. It's a good many years since I was here, looking after my brother and it seems to me that I met you then. I'm looking, now, for a man named Hunter Browne. I am Mrs. Huldah Waring—or what is left of that much injured woman."

Mrs. Waring was inclined to be flighty in her conversation; the non-appearance of her niece had already ceased to trouble her, and she allowed herself to be led in by Jefferson, who looked as though he thought that there was enough left of her yet, and that it would be wisdom for him to hold his peace.

"Supper," she said, sharply. "I am almost famished. We should have been here hours ago."

"All ready, madam, and waiting. Scrub off a little of the dust and by that time I'll put you down to a lay-out such as you don't find every day in your life. The town is a little upset; but everything goes on all right, here. After you've had your feed we'll look over them questions ov yours, an' mebbe I kin answer 'em up."

"That reminds me. Is Millie here? The girl was to be at the best hotel. Perhaps there is a better establishment in Bunco. I don't want to make any mistakes."

"Millie?" responded Jefferson thoughtfully scratching his head. He was getting down from his stilts and lapsing into his everyday style of conversation very fast.

"I've heard that name before. P'raps yer mean Miss Vandeleur."

"Yes. That is the name. Where is she? Why does she not show her face when I've come here, all the way, in her interest?"

"Well, the fact are, she's jest stepped out. Mebbe she'll be back afore yer git through with grub. Ef she don't we kin send out an' see. Make yerself at home, now. It will all be right. Hyer, We Wailo! Where in thunder are that Chinees! Ef he don't stick 'round closer I'll bounce him. He won't earn his salt."

We Wailo did not come, but Mrs. Waring was shown to a room, and, with her went the other feminine, who was as silent as a mute, and tramped along as though she was simply a machine.

Mrs. Waring did all the talking and the other the listening.

In a little while the two reappeared and took their places at the long table in the dining room behind which We Wailo suddenly skipped.

At the other end of the table were seated two men, who, between mouthfuls, conversed in a low tone. The two were Colonel Johnson and his satellite, Tom Bowers. It seemed that the crowd had chased the latter mainly for the sake of seeing him run, and had speedily forgotten all about him in their renewed interest in Beans.

The Flat from Walnut Bar had a good deal to say; Colonel Johnson listened to him closely. Both looked up in some surprise at hearing a cry from Mrs. Waring.

That lady had risen to her feet with a carelessness that came near to wrecking chair and table, and was vigorously prodding with her forefinger the air in front of her while she exclaimed:

"Who are you; who are you? I would know your face in a thousand."

Then she dropped back into her chair and stared sternly, like one who had just received a great shock.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MAN ON THE ROPE.

DANDY DAVE was silent as a wolf in a trap, and just about as vicious on opportunity. He showed his teeth but made no snap, since he saw no chance for his teeth to meet. Millie felt that there was no help to be expected from him. There was just one chance left, and she had been too much startled to try it sooner. She turned on the man who stalked by her side.

"Perhaps there has been some mistake. If you have turned Mr. Browne's men out in whose interest was it done? Do you or did you know a man by the name of Silas Allbright? Is he your employer?"

"No," answered the Mexican, briefly.

"But Allbright talked of procuring some men to do this very work; indeed, I think he had his arrangements made, though he said it was best for me to know as little as possible about that part. He was my friend. Are you certain that you are not injuring one it is your duty to protect?"

"No difference does it make. Work we for Senor Pereira. He killed the American dog himself. There will be kill also most likely; yonder man certain. Speak nothing, my ears are closed."

"But if you were all enemies of Mr. Allbright, how does it come you are not friends of Browne? Perhaps I have misunderstood you."

"That could hardly have been possible, but when Miss Vandeleur halted and asked the question she certainly could doubt no longer."

"Browne! Curses on him!" shouted the Mexican, his face suddenly convulsing with rage. "Ah, the vile thief! If Manuel had not stayed me, the hand of Gomez Cavillo had slain him in his blood. What is gold when revenge must wait? Beware. If aught thou art to Hunter Browne thy blood will flow with his. We will crush the whole brood at once."

In the semi-darkness Millie could see his eyes gleaming with a threatening fierceness, and she did not doubt but that he would be as good as his word. She closed her lips tightly to repress a scream, and had nothing more to say. Cavillo waited an instant for an answer, and then, with an impatient tug at her shoulder, urged her on.

"In there," he said, pointing straight into the darkness; and she went forward blindly, as though there could be no choice in the evils that were before her.

It was neither a cave nor a well into which she descended; but simply a slope, leading into the Bunker Hill Mine. For all that it was terrible enough. The spirit of many a girl would have broken down entirely.

After a little there was a feeble glimmer of light. To the left ran a narrower passageway, reaching to a cell-like excavation in which was burning a lantern.

"Hold up thy two hands," ordered Gomez, harshly.

Without hesitation Millie held up her round little wrists, and about them Cavillo speedily knotted a cord.

He looked at her sharply, half doubting whether she was secure enough; but as she sunk noiselessly down, apparently exhausted by fatigue and her emotions, he thought there could be little danger of escape, with the solid mountain behind her, and the men on guard at the point of egress.

"Stay there. When the senor comes will thy fate be decided. He and his sister hold thy neck in their fingers. For me—I could crush it."

He received no answer, and thought the girl terrified beyond speech, though, actually, she was silent as much through wonder at what Hunter Browne could have done to awaken so much hate.

The quick steps of the Mexican sounded along the slope, and finally passed beyond hearing, while Miss Vandeleur was alone with the dampness, the gloom, and silence.

Five, ten minutes passed, that seemed like

hours in spite of the fact that the mind of the girl was busy with the dangers and the duties of her situation.

In that time she had thought of a thousand things, and last of all came to her an idea that contained a spark of hope.

The lantern burned but dimly, yet it might aid her to remove the cord around her wrists. She arose steadily and moved over to where it was standing. With the utmost care she handled it, since it was possible in her efforts that the light might become extinguished. To be in total darkness was the only added horror that was needed to break her down completely.

It was an oil lantern, the cup fitting into the glass, and secured by a spring. Her wrists had been bound back to back. Taking the handle of the lantern in her teeth she pressed back the spring, and after several efforts drew down the cup, exposing the flame.

Carefully she set the cup down, and then held the knot of the cord in the blaze until it broke into a slow, smoldering flame.

It was not as hard to do as she had feared. There was a little scorching and some pain. That was all, for she did the work slowly. When the knot was through the rope loosened. With an effort her hands were free.

Hope grew stronger. Leaving the lantern she went, out into the passage, and was about to feel her way to the right toward the opening, when she was startled at hearing a noise behind her, that seemed to come from the inner recesses of the shaft, while from the outside came two men running.

She drew back at once, and just in time.

The men stopped at the very spot, apparently listening. She heard one of them say, with a careless laugh:

"The old fox sticks hard to his hole. I reckon if we hadn't caught him sleepin' he'd hev downed more ner one ov ther boys."

"Hush yer gab," answered the other. "They're bringin' him. Ef ther boss knew what war what he'd finish things up in thar. Ef he gits outside he may talk too loud. I ain't altergether easy yit, fur he's a man that's hard ter beat."

"Hard er not the job'll be did afore mornin'. Ther pile are byer somewhar, an' we'll hev ther secret outen him ef we hev ter roast his heart out. The Mexican may howl ef he wants to."

The steps from the depths of the mine came nearer, and from the noise Millie judged that a captive was being dragged along by half a dozen men. He was silent enough, now; but from what she heard no doubt he had struggled hard, even though he knew the struggle was hopeless.

Behind her she suddenly heard a dull thud, that caused her to start and then turn quickly. To her surprise on the rocky floor lay a few coiled rings of rope, and an end, reaching upward, was lost in the night above.

Strangely enough she had not thought to examine the ceiling before, though little good would it have done, since all she could now see was that the rope went up until it was no longer visible.

It had not been there before, and it had not come there of itself. Possibly there was some one near that would aid her.

She called as loudly as she dared, but there was no answer.

She tugged at the rope, and found that it remained firm, and seemed to reach a great way up.

"Wherever it goes to I can reach the end; and I can be no worse off there than here. Good for me that I have had the training that few other women have had. If I am not more worn out than I feel I may give them the slip. Now, wrists, do your duty."

So she said to herself in thought and coolly catching hold of the rope she began to climb steadily upward.

The cord was a large one, that filled her hands fairly well and when she had gone twenty feet there was a huge knot that made an elegant resting-place. Swinging in air Millie reached out a hand on either side and found the wall of rock all around her. The place seemed like a large chimney, though her eyes could not descry as yet any opening at the top.

Making a short rest she resumed her upward journey, when she was startled at feeling the rope vibrate, as if moved by some one above who was descending.

"It must be a friend," Miss Vandeleur thought, "and if so it will be safest to give him warning."

Then, aloud:

"Hillo, above there! Do you want to shake me off? Climb back and give me a chance to get out of this. I'm a woman, and those villains below would murder me."

"Can't do it. Hold still! Be careful, and let me go past you. There is no danger; you will find a friend above, and when I get at the thieves below there'll a merry little war, and don't you forget it. I'm in town, all dressed up—to kill."

The voice was a careless, almost laughing one, and totally unfamiliar to Millie. The owner of it was as expert as herself, since he let himself down without even touching her hands as he

passed her, and then slid on rapidly not heeding her warning to halt.

There was no time to waste in speculations; the strain on her wrists was becoming too great to admit of any delay, though fortunately there was another knot only a few yards above, on which she braced her feet and took another brief rest. Then upward she went until she heard a hoarse voice almost in her ear:

"What's ther racket? Comin' back ag'in? I thort you'd lose sand when yer saw what sort-er a hole was afore yer."

"Don't frut yourself about sand, but help me out of this," gasped Millie, who, at the prospect of near assistance felt herself suddenly growing weak.

There was a grunt of surprise, followed by an exclamation of delight.

"Good girl! Ef she hain't played roots on 'em all my name ain't Plumb Center Pete! Hyer yer be. Stiddy by jerks!"

An arm went around Miss Vandeleur's waist, and with one wave of strength she was swung from the rope to a footing on the solid rock.

"Say, yer hain't seen nothin' ov Hunt Browne; hev yer?" asked Blockey, transferring his grasp from her waist to her arm. "Me an' my pard, ther perfessor, hez come in ter back his game, an' now we wants ter find whar he spreads his lay out."

"I do not know," gasped Millie, her breath half gone from her recent exertions.

"They are all thieves and murderers below. They have a prisoner. I could not see him but I believe they said it was Browne. Oh, they are all wicked men to whom killing is a joke. What can we do?"

"Are yer sure it war Browne? Ef he's down thar how in blazes did his rope git up hyer?"

Miss Vandeleur had no answer ready for him so the darkness answered for her.

"We Wailo bling lopeuppie. Chinaman allee loundee, top-side ebley time! Whah Goggly Gavage?"

"Cussed ef it ain't ther Chinaman ag'in," exclaimed Pete, with a start.

"You bettee. W'bah's th' ploffessle?"

"He's down thar, Chinees; and I've a good notion to chuck you over and let you go hunt him. How in blazes did yer ever find yer way hyer? Yer' beginnin' ter git dangersome."

"Huntee Goggly Gavage. No can finde. See Blownee clawl uppee and We Wailo heah come too. No can climb down lope; pulle lope uppe. Allee same Blowne no lun away. Eh, c'ho? Be heap fun heah soon. Eblee bodde comee. Want see Huntee Blowne heap self an' take cah ploffesslee. What 'Melican glil want-chee?"

"Never mind the girl—hark! I hear something bett'r worth listening to."

Nellie's keen ears had caught the noises that were barely audible. She turned toward them. At a little distance she saw through an orifice stars twinkling, and broke away to reach the outer air. In a dozen steps she had reached a rocky ledge, and gazing downward saw a strange sight.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD.

At Huldah Waring's cry We Wailo had given a start. The finger of the woman pointed very much at large—no wonder if he might think it was pointing at him. It was the voice of Colonel Johnson that undeceived him.

"I'll be teetotally condensed if it ain't. My ears or my eyes are not worth a cent any more or I'd have kept out of this mix. Yes, don't glower at me that way. It's your former husband, alive and very much kicking. Now touch me lightly. It would be a shame to spoil the harmonies after all these years of separation. Ah, she must have broken. Confound it if she hasn't fainted. Why, she used to have more nerve than a cast-iron camel with a bronze hump, and now she throws up her heels just because she thinks she has seen a ghost. Chuck a pail of water over her, Chinees, and see if you can bring her round. I'm really too hungry to waste time with such fooling."

And then the colonel actually applied himself to the edibles with a vigor that showed such a thing as a fainting woman could have no effect on his appetite.

The Chinaman was more solicitous for her welfare; and the woman who was Mrs. Waring's companion was not backward. Between them and nature the fainting woman returned to consciousness about the time that Colonel Johnson had taken the sharpest edge off of his hunger.

"Waring, is it really you? No, no, it cannot be!"

Then followed three or four little cries, somewhere between a shriek and a groan.

"Oh, come now," said the colonel coldly. "If you keep on like that you'll have the whole house here. Maybe you believe in ghosts, but I'll swear I don't. If none of them are deader than I am they're thundering frauds. I've been dodging you for pretty well on to twenty years—I've been divorced for fifteen, and had my name legally changed by act of legislature about the same time—and now it's about time

to have a general clearing up. I suppose you are aware that I am not dead; but, on the contrary, very much alive."

"And Edmund Farrell did not kill you?"

"Small blame to him if he didn't. He thought well enough that he had done so, and for about a month I thought so myself."

"You worthless wretch! And on your account I hunted my own brother to death. Oh, I was mad, mad, mad. It was on my account he quarreled with you; I sent after him the detective that hounded him to his grave."

"Scarcely, my dear, scarcely. I had no desire to put an oar in—I don't hate Ed Farrell half as much as I once did—but now that the matter is broached, I may as well give the whole thing away. Unless he has handed in his checks in the last few weeks Ed Farrell is still alive."

"It is false!" cried Mrs. Waring.

"I saw his freshly-made grave, and the copy of his will which left me five thousand dollars. More, I got the money."

"He could write the will a great deal better if he was living than if he was dead, couldn't he? And I wouldn't think much of a man who wouldn't give five thousand dollars to be rid of you and the detectives together. I gave four or five times that. The fact is, Huldah, that while you were a very honest woman you were a perfect screamer."

"But I do not understand yet."

"Whew! you have changed. Twenty years ago if I had said that much, there wouldn't have been a whole plate left on the table by this time. What is it you don't understand?"

"How could such a deception be possible?" responded Mrs. Waring, ignoring the reflection on her temper.

"Simple enough. After our little racket, out of which I came out second best, he got away, and so did I—in different directions."

"Your detectives were after him—almost had him. It was necessary to do something to throw them off, unless he wanted to go entirely to the bad. He stumbled across Hunter Browne when the latter was just climbing the range to pass over. Your brother had been pretty badly cut up, but he kept that to himself, and Browne was really dying."

"Ed had some money and had made some discoveries; Browne was in a worry about a little girl of his that he was afraid would come to want. Farrell proposed a change of names, and he would provide for the girl. He had a girl of his own, but he was willing to let her drop in the background. There was a boy in the matter, too, but I don't know rightly whose son he was. At all events Farrell agreed to take care of the children until the youngest was twenty-one, and then divide between the boy and Browne's girl the ostensible fortune that he then had. He figured that by that time he could make another fortune for himself, and if he didn't, it wouldn't make much difference. What do you think of that for a story, eh? I saw Ed Farrell not a month ago. He's quit the disguise that fooled his own sister, and he has no idea of the neat little revenge I had on him. He's lost twenty years of his life to save himself from being hung for a man that isn't dead. I've been thinking it all over since then, and when I heard the games that were being set up against him I weakened at last. I'm going to straighten things up the best I know how, and then Tommy, here, and I will go on to the next camp and drive mules."

Colonel Johnson told his long story with a coolness that was both wonderful and convincing. His former wife shuddered and listened as if fascinated, though when he ceased she was able to speak quite calmly.

"I have changed since those days, I hope; but no matter. I know that I have done wrong in something—I, too, came here to make an effort to set things right; and yet, what a maze I was in. I have been searching for my brother's daughter and found her. She had been swindled by those in whose hands she was placed, and had had a hard life of it, yet had grown to be a handsome, courageous woman. A true woman, I hope, though she was a trapeze performer. A man by the name of Allbright—a broken-down detective I think—had lately given her an idea of who she was—or rather was supposed to be—and she was coming here to fight for her rights. Poor girl. She intended to fight her own father."

"A trapeze performer? I think, my dear, you are off your eggs. What was her name?"

"Millie Vandeleur was her stage name—and, indeed, the only name to which she had ever answered."

"Then you are just as wrong as you ever were. The daughter of the real Edmund Farrell—the man that goes now by the name of Browne—was brought up as Rita Goyisolo; and the oddest thing is that she looks like a Mexican senorita and isn't; and the other girl doesn't and is. It's an elegant mix, but we'll straighten it out in the morning. Have you taken it all in, heathen?"

We Wailo had remained judiciously in the background but he had listened with undis-

guised interest, and was in no way disconcerted by the sudden question.

"We Wailo genlee allee loundee. Takee in bellee well, topside, g'low. Wantee ax who Dellengel Deck."

"How did you come to know anything about it. Derringer Deck ist he boy in the case. He went by the name of Farrell for years, but whether he is son of the living or the dead, Hunter Browne—as they call him now—alone can tell. Hello! what's the matter with you?"

"Heap sollee. Hunter Blowne in bad sclave, no get out soon kickee bucket all ovelee. We Wailo lun see."

The Chinaman pranced off; but Colonel Johnson shook his head as he saw him go. He had detected symptoms of a deeper interest than he could understand. Had he watched the Celestial he might have seen him slink from the Jefferson House, and when once fairly away break into a run. He was going straight toward the Bunker Hill Mine.

The reader has seen how he appeared there; but the explanation of his haste is yet to be given.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MAN AT BAY.

THE disappearance of Hunter Browne had been partially explained by Plumb Center Pete; but even he had not anticipated the little game of We Wailo, that cut off the possibility of retreat and left him walled in, with the mountains on one side and Big Frank and his gang on the other. The brief conversation overheard gave the facts of his capture. He had been taken asleep; and now was dragged out for a purpose.

There was a little circle of a dozen before him, and though the light was so dim and uncertain that anything like recognition was almost impossible, the men were all masked.

One stood a little apart from the rest, and addressed Browne in a muffled voice, though his words seemed for the others:

"Ef this man keers fur life he'll hev ther chance ter show it. Ef gold are wuth more than a hull skin he kin figger it out in jest one minnit. Brethren, tie him to ther post."

Willing hands knotted the ropes around Browne's wrists and ankles. In a trice he was fastened almost beyond the power of motion, while behind the post stood a man holding a scarf, ready to stifle any scream, should it be necessary.

"Now, Browne," continued the spokesman, "we know yer hev'n't bin runnin' things hyer all fur fun. We've bin a-watchin' yer when yer least thort it. We know yer hev put out a heap, but there's a cold hundred thousand somewhar, an' that's ther pile we're after. It ain't yer money er yer life; but it's yer gold sure, an' maybe yer life afore we git through gittin' it. Are yer ready ter p'int out whar yer hid it, er must we do worse?"

Browne looked haggard and worn, but there was no sign of quailing as he answered:

"If I had a million you shouldn't have an ounce. Do your worst. I defy you all! It looks like your time now; mine will come by and by."

"Mebbe yer don't know who ye'r dealin' with. This ain't no milk an' water gang. We're jest bizness from ther ground up."

"I don't care who you are, or what you are. You have my answer."

"Mebbe you think we dassn't go through with ther job? Ef yer do ye'r badly fooled. We've changed ther deck an' begun a new deal. It's ther gold we want, an' then we'll skip. Ef yer kin ketch us you kin git it out ov our hides, an' ef you don't ther Bunker Hill will soon make you even ag'in. We ain't jumpin' yer claim hyar; that war ther other gang."

"It makes no difference who you are, or what you are," responded Browne, sturdily. "You get nothing out of me, and I'll be even for this work or die trying. Now, do your worst."

At the challenge, two men stepped gravely forward.

Each held an end of a long rope, which they kept stretched between them.

They moved forward until the center of the rope touched the body of the prisoner, and then walking in great circles, they wound the cord round and round him.

At first, it was no great torture.

At least, it was one that could be borne.

But inch after inch of Browne's body was covered with the tightening coils, until at length he began to feel only too well the ingenuity of the scheme for torture.

Then another pair of men stepped out, and took up the work where the first pair left off.

"Don't you fellows make any mistake," called out Browne. "My gold you will never get. I alone know where it is, and I'll never tell. You are going to kill me inside of the next ten minutes, and I just want to say it straight to you before I go, that you've been cursedly badly fooled. Good-night, you villains all. I'm on the road now, and I'll make the landing before morning. If you'd given me a show, I would have taken the heft of you along till the roads

forked. Curse you all for cowards. I'm off, but my ghost will come back to haunt you."

His bitterness moved no one in the slightest. They simply went on winding slow death around him. He felt the paralysis of the checked circulation, and the horror of an uncertainty about the end.

Then came the sound made by horses galloping recklessly along the trail that led to the spot.

The noise gave the fainting man a little thrill of hope, and at the same time puzzled the inquisitors. There were men on picket-duty, beyond, who should have given notice of the approach; yet the new-comers advanced without challenge or hindrance.

A moment later they knew the reason.

Pereira, with eyes flashing, hair flying, a revolver in his hand, dashed into the circle. He had leaped from his horse just at the limit of the little clump of shanties, and without hesitation or fear, sprung to the side of the prisoner, and as he sprung he shouted:

"Back, you dogs! Gomez, where art thou? Art thou a traitor, too? Mexicans, stand by me if you would share the gold. This man belongs to me and mine."

As he spoke his knife ran down between prisoner and post, the razor-like blade under his whole weight and skillful management passing through many of the rings of rope and loosening the rest, while the revolver he had transferred to his left hand menaced the crowd before him. Though Hunter Browne was still bound beyond the power of motion the crawling death had been turned back.

At the challenge of Pereira one of the maskers stepped quickly forward.

"They said that thou wert false to us. That thou hadst led us into this trap to take possession for thee, and that then thou wouldst come upon us with the Americans from the camp and cheat us of the gold which thou alone couldst find. Even if thou hadst done this thing I would care nothing. Gomez Cavillo is here for revenge. No other hand than his can take vengeance on yonder dog for his wrongs to my Nita. He won her and cast her aside. So I helped him to his death-agonies what was it to me if it be Manuel Pereira or Big Frank who stood by my side? We would not harm thee, but aside thou must stand. I hate thee, Manuel Pereira, since but for thee I would not have lost my Nita. As her brother only I can not kill thee. Yet if thou art across our way thou must fall."

His hand had been on his revolver. At the closing threat it sprung up in true line with the senior's heart, covering him with deadly aim, just as a great blaze shot up from one of the neighboring cabins.

At the flaring light all save Gomez turned in spite of themselves, since it seemed like a signal of instant attack. As they wheeled there came the crack of several pistol-shots, followed by a mocking laugh.

"You'd set Dandy Dave up to toast, would you? Ha, ha! Into you it goes chuck up! Take me ef yer kin!"

One man dropped dead, another staggered away, wounded. If Dandy Dave had held a pair of sixes he would have stayed for the gang. Unfortunately for him when he had worked himself loose the weapon of which by chance he possessed himself held only two loaded chambers. When he had touched a match to the oil he had scattered and fired his two shots he ran fleetly away in the long, dark shadow at the rear of the house.

Pereira was startled—Gomez never moved his eye from its aim. Neither noticed two shadows flowing from either side.

The first shadow resolved itself into Professor Elderberry, with spectacles on his nose, and a revolver in each hand.

Goggle George dropped his drawl.

"Sock it to 'em, boys!" he yelled. "Don't throw a shot away. Shoot to kill, and I'll pay for the corpses. Throw in your men from the rear, Beans, and we'll hold up this end. Here you have it!"

The punctuation of his sentences was a little irregular, but it was done with his revolvers, and the grand stop came when he abruptly flung out his fist sideways. When Gomez Cavillo went down at the first fire Pereira turned, uplifted knife in hand, toward the very man who had come to his aid. Such treachery could hardly be expected or guarded against, yet the professor met it. Just when he was in true range he dashed the butt of his revolver into Pereira's face, the one blow striking the Mexican senseless. Then he had to turn to meet the rush of Big Frank, who had gathered his men by the cry:

"All together, here! It's only one man!"

They shot as they came, and the professor dropped the revolver from the left hand as a bullet went through the fleshy part of the arm, but at the same time he took a snap-shot behind him.

The other shadow that had crept in was the madwoman he had already seen conversing with Manuel Pereira. Like the rest of her race the knife was her weapon, and in another moment she would have had it in the heart of Hunter Browne.

The bullet struck fairly on the blade and the woman reeled back from the unexpected shock.

A shout went up from Big Frank's men. Six of them were down, but as the seventh fell Professor Elderberry toppled over.

Small blame to him! There were five bullets in his body!

"Now, out with that fire! We'll have all Bunco up byer ef they see it. One of you take that madwoman away and a couple of you see if there's any life in this carrion."

"You bet there's life in it," howled a harsh voice in response. "I ain't never gone back yit on a man I made my pard. Hyer's Plumb Center Pete, come ter kill."

Again the shaft disgorged—this time Plumb Center Pete and We Wailo.

The latter ran straight to the Mexican woman who, recovered from her shock, had again flung herself at Hunter Browne.

"You fool you!" he hissed. "This is not Hunter Browne at all. It was he that fired the shanty! He has gone and you never will see him again."

For answer Nita gave a great cry and bounded toward the burning building. We Wailo with ready revolvers turned toward Pete Blockey.

That individual talked a good deal, but he knew a thing or two about a fight against odds. The crowd was between him and the fire.

Just in time to barely miss the volley that answered his defiance he threw himself full length upon the ground, his outstretched hands holding his self-cocking sixes, and his work began.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GENERAL ROUND-UP.

PLUMB CENTER PETE was cool as an iceberg, and deadly as fate. Almost invisible, save by the light of his pistols' flashes, he had fair marks for such wonderful good shooting as his, and yet, until he could reach Big Frank who seemed to bear a charmed life, the end was in doubt.

Everything was passing with blinding quickness. Shot after shot Blockey fired without waste, while, in return, the bullets whistled around him, or sunk into his flesh; but the deadliest danger came when Big Frank, springing in from the side, stood almost over him.

"Curse you!" he shouted. "I have you now!"

His finger was on the trigger when there was a double report as loud as a young cannon.

"We Wailo loundee eebly time," shouted the Celestial-looking little one, a smoking pistol in each hand; and, as if in answer to his words, there came a hoarse cheer, followed by a cry of dismay.

There was no shamming now.

Buck Beans and the remnant of his men were indeed around.

At the time of the diversion caused by the pleasantry with Tenderfoot Tom he had made good his retreat, and by a devious journey, came back to the Bunker Hill just in time.

As he and his men charged in with the cheer, the remnant from the savage fight broke away. Up to this they had taken their chances. The fewer the survivors the fewer there would be to share the hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold they were sure Hunter Browne had hid away. Now, with the odds all the other way, there was no hope to hold them, and their greedy courage was gone.

Plumb Center Pete, though wounded more than once, rose coolly to his feet to meet the new-comers.

"Ye'r late fur ther frolic, boyees, but ye'r in good time fur ther funeral. Look after ther boss. Some stray lead may nev reached him; otherwise he's all right. I'm afeard my pard hez gone up ther flume, but ef he has ther never war a better man ner Goggle George went out ov ther wet with his boots on."

Hunter Browne, as he still may best be called, in spite of the revelations of the *ci devant* Waring, was not seriously injured, and We Wailo was already caring for him. Buck Beans, after a hasty glance in his direction, turned his attention toward the rest.

"Oñ, I'm all right, Pete. There's a reasonably fair lead shaft in my anatomy, but I'm as good as three dead men yet. It was only the shock. Derringer Deck is hard to kill; though this is the closest shave he's had yet."

"Dog gone your pictures!"

Blockey took in the disclosure with surprise. "So yer bin playin' us fur flats all 'round, an' made ther turn. All right; I've heard ov you afore. Close mouth an' hands on ther board. I don't want ter skip jest yet, an' I won't unless you give me away."

"There'll be 'trouble' if I do. O. K., old man! We'll see how the land lays. And, by the way, if you see anything of Dandy Dave take his part. He's an old side pard of mine, and helped me through the raffle. If we both slipped up a little on the girl, she's safe anyhow. Now tie me up. If you look you'll find me fuller of holes than a skimmer."

"An' none of 'em very bad," answered Pete, who had already begun his work.

"Glad to hear it. How's Browne? I hope all

of us cripples can be moved down to Bunco. Beans can hold on here, now that he's in possession, especially if you and Dandy can stay and see the thing through the drag."

"Right you be. With all this dead meat piled up hyer, ther ghosts alone could keep ther ranch. You bet they don't want no more of Plumb Center Pete in thein."

"Get Brown and the women away before Bunco comes out after Beans. And look after Pereira a little. He tried to kill me just when I was backing his hand the heaviest, and I hit him for all I was worth. I didn't want to kill him, though; and if he's not done for handle him kindly. He may talk, and he knows a heap."

Without much searching Pereira was found. He was just recovering his senses, but the butt of the professor's pistol had flattened his nose almost even with his face. The so-called Hunter Browne had already regained his strength, and had been giving a few hasty directions. He had even darted into the shaft to see, of course, what mischief had been done. As he came out, his face lit with a satisfied smile, he saw Pereira, who had been bound as a prisoner. Millie was just behind him, but of her he took no note.

"So you wanted to get me and my mine, did you—and your tools went back on you? Better luck next time. I've a mind to turn you loose to try."

"Curse the mine," retorted Pereira, savagely, "thou it was that I was after, and thy mine was but the bait. What was gold when we labored for revenge?"

"That's it, old man. I can make some allowance when I think what an idiot you have been. You're after the wrong man. Hunter Browne died—well, close toward twenty years ago. I took his name to save my neck, but I didn't shoulder his misdeeds at the same time. If the Goytisolos want him, supposing they go look for him in some other world. I can swear that I never harmed them. If I set you free will you take your niece and jump the camp?"

"My niece?" Pereira had been startled by the statement of the man he had known as Browne; but the word niece seemed to strike him most of all.

"Mistaken art thou? The child died when an infant. Only Nita and I are there; and Nita—my sister—is mad."

"Not so mad as you, I guess. Anyhow, take her and go. It is the gospel truth I told you; but if you ever want to try it on again, I'll take better care. They say she went as my finger points; follow her. Should you still doubt, I can give you proof at a better time. For the present, we don't need you here. It's too great a temptation to murder."

Pereira hesitated, even when his limbs had been set free.

"Is it the very truth you tell me?" "The very truth. My name was Farrell, and I had killed my man—just as you no doubt have done. Go, now, or my offer will not hold good."

"It has all been a mistake," answered Pereira, in a subdued tone. "You hold the whip hand, and I submit. Yet beware of Bunco! Your foes there are not all dead yet, even if I be not there to urge them on."

He turned then and went his way, looking for his sister. Neither of them ever came back.

Down in Bunco some time after breakfast, there was a little family gathering. There were certain mysteries even yet which Hunter Browne—as he persisted in being called—could alone unravel. He had met Waring coldly, and yet with a certain pleasure, and he revealed that he had had his shock a month before, when he had almost positively recognized the man whom, for so long, he supposed he had killed. His story was brief.

"I do not object to telling everything now. I had always intended to keep to the letter of my agreement with poor Browne, and if I have not done it altogether, it was not my fault."

"We had known each other years before, and had been pretty good friends. I had had a fight with a detective, and had been badly cut, but had kept my nerve up. Browne was booked through, certain. He had a boy he wanted to provide for. I had left behind me a girl. He told me, too, about a Mexican senorita whom he had treated badly enough, but who, he thought, was dead. I agreed to take care of his boy and give him half of what I was then worth, leaving the other half to my girl, whom I would call after the senorita he had abandoned."

"The boy is the young man yonder. He has been gone for years, has received a college education, and has graduated in mining matters, as well as sport in the West. As Professor Elderberry he fooled even me; as much perhaps because he was better posted in sulphurets than any man I ever met. Through his disguise as Derringer Deck, he has made a record."

"Then I am actually the son of the dead Hunter Browne?" asked the professor, an earnest look in his face, and a quaver in his voice.

"So far as his word goes, there is evidence that you are."

"And the girl known as Nita Goytisolo—is she your daughter?"

"There are two Nita Goytisolos," answered Browne, gravely. "The one left with a Mrs. Hammond, in San Francisco, was my daughter. The older one claims to be the daughter of the dead Hunter Browne. Yet Pereira told me that the child died. I cannot understand."

"Whose daughter be We Wailo? Eh? Much flaidée kin no finde plopá papa if him don't speak soon. Any cash piece going him loundee ebley time."

The Chinaman had remained in the background unusually long, for him. He slipped forward now with a simper on his face, and executed a low salaam, then stood, with his hands folded and his head bent down, in front of Browne.

"How in blazes do you suppose I know, be-then, if you don't? But if you know what is good for you you'll draw out. This is a family reunion, and outsiders are not wanted."

"We Wailo belly much belongee top-sidee famby. If you don't b'leeve um ask Goggy Gawge. We Wailo no him blothlee anyhow choy but him loundee neah, eh, Dellenglee Deck?"

The tones of the Chinaman changed; he looked up saucily into the face of the professor, smiled cheerily, and throwing him a kiss from the tip of a very taper finger skipped hastily out of the room.

"What sort of a lunatic is the Celestial, anyway?" inquired Browne, puzzled and looking at his young superintendent for an explanation.

"It means—wait and you will see. I begin to believe that more than one of us has been deceived, and that he has the means of removing a haunting fear that drove me here to learn the worst, if need be. He will be back soon. You can prepare for a surprise."

"And, meantime, to repeat the question, whose daughter am I? Is Millie Vandeleur out of the mystery altogether, and only the poor trapeze girl she was when Allbright found her?"

Millie stepped forward and gazed around inquiringly.

"Allbright?" said Colonel Johnson uneasily, as he filled his mouth with tobacco, and gave a covert glance at his former wife. "Allbright? That's the same old coon that used to be called Detective Prim, and he's had his eye on you for a long time, my dear—on you and your mother, though he never suspected the relationship between you. I am not sure that you will rejoice in your relations, but I have reason to believe that you are the daughter of Huldah Waring, and that I have the honor to be your paternal ancestor. If there is any mistake in the information I regret it exceedingly, but I give it for what it is worth. I stole you away from your mother in your infancy providing certain traces pointing toward the deceased Farrell's family, but I now rejoice in the reunion with the proud consciousness of one who has done his duty. More facts to follow. All previous declarations to the contrary are hereby recalled."

Huldah Waring gave a cry and fell into Millie's arms just as a beautiful girl glided into the room.

"Nita Goytisolo!" exclaimed Hunter Browne. "Yes; but—your daughter as well. The story I told you the other night was a garbled one, not through any fault of mine. I had overheard the vaporings of a madwoman and took them all for truth, though I had the prudence not to reveal myself until I could know more. I understood then—she wheeled suddenly and faced Derringer Deck—" what it was that drove you away from my side, and sent you on the wild-goose-chase that finally landed you here. Will you forgive me if I was madly jealous and followed you? Will you forgive me if you hear that that jealousy nearly cost another and an innocent one her life?"

"I am all amazement, but I feel as if I had nothing to forgive. You were—"

"We Wailo, and always 'bellee much loundee' to take on myself the credit of what you had done. As the world generally believed what I said, your wife has certainly been a credit to you. Trust me, I shall never offend so again."

It is wearisome to the reader to enter too closely into explanations when the closing pages leave the heroes and heroines all alive, and fairly flourishing. What need to say more?

Until the Bunker Hill was stocked and changed into a corporation it prospered finely under the management of Professor Elderberry, who, with his charming wife, remained for several years at Bunco—Hunter Browne, who had lost neither the mine nor the boarded gold residin' with them. The professor, however, discarded spectacles, except on emergency. His sight was as keen as that of an eagle, but with the glasses he had had ground specially for the purpose he could see what was going on behind him. The trick is well known; he put it to practical use.

Pereira and his sister disappeared, as did the fragments of the bands once headed by Kale Carter and Big Frank, but Plumb Center Pete ruffed coolly around Bunco several days before taking his departure for fresh pastures. The camp never rightly knew what he and the professor had to do with the corpses of which, for

a time, the woods seemed full. Just before he left he said to Derringer Deck:

"I suppose you've caught on to the fact that I whooped 'em up fur ther Chinese because he war, ez I thought, salivatin' ther other gang; but, mebbe, you don't know what became ov Johnny Short. I'm him! I war just experimentin' on ther profits in ther road-agent ring—with mebbe an eye to ther divy when I raked 'em all in. It don't pan out well in ther long run, an' I won't do so no more."

Huldah Waring took her daughter and went back Friscowards. The companion went along. She was the woman to whom Col nel Johnson had intrusted his daughter, giving her the name of Vandeleur, but leaving some few tokens that it might be Farrell. He was a cold-hearted sort of fraud, for he seemed to have for years utterly forgotten her.

Tom Bowers, after all the pros and cons that had been weighed, was the Flat from Walnut Bar and nothing more. He was a master hand with the whip, but beyond that relied on the colonel. Johnson had sent him to Walnut Bar and Bunco with orders to find out all he could about half a dozen people he named and he did the best he could. The two drifted away together in search of mules, or something else. He might have fixed the murder of Allbright on Pereira, but for what use? He remained silent. The Mexican was adjudged to be dead; an administrator took charge of his effects, which did not pan out as immense as expected, and the little town again went round on wheels.

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